

Co-Constructing Writing Pedagogy With Two-and-Three-Year-Old Children

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Language exists, first of all, in its raw and primitive being, in the simple, material form of writing, a stigma upon things, a mark imprinted across the world which is a part of its most ineffaceable forms. In a sense, this layer of language is unique and absolute. But it also gives rise to two other forms of discourse which provide it with a frame: above it, there is commentary, which recasts the given signs to serve a new purpose, and below it, the text, whose primacy is presupposed by commentary to exist hidden beneath the marks visible to all. Hence there are three levels of language, all based upon the single being of the written word (Foucault, 2002, p.47).

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I, Helen Bradford, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Research over the past four decades confirms that by the age of three years old children already understand some of the functions and purpose of writing. Evidence also suggests that some children are capable of articulating this understanding. From a developmental perspective it therefore makes sense that the literate performances of three-year-old children have their roots in much earlier writing experiences. Building on this premise, and further evidence to suggest that children as young as two years old are beginning to understand the symbolic nature of print, the research reported in this dissertation focused on discourse of writing, through recording children's and adults' conceptualisations, the pedagogical approaches of the children's pre-school setting, and approaches to writing in the home environment. Foucaultian theory of truth and shifting power relations provided a framework for understanding and interpreting the discourse of writing that emerged.

The study investigated the writing practices of nine families and their two-year-old and-three-year old children in an early years pre-school setting in the east of England. The first aim of the research was to develop a clear understanding of what children of this age already know about the functions and purpose of writing. To this end the children themselves contributed to the process of discovery, through revealing what they knew about writing and how they communicated through this medium. Second, the research sought to develop joint understanding amongst parents and the early years setting of how two-year-old and-three-year-old children express themselves through writing. The research found that most adults did not perceive that the children could write, a perception that was rooted in the conceptualisation of writing as necessarily formed of conventional text, and a skill to be developed and taught at a later age. In direct contrast to this the research found that children were not only writing, but that they were writing despite adult conceptualisations. The participant children were engaging in their own discourse of writing, driven by self-belief in what they were able to achieve through using writing as a medium for recording and sharing information. It is argued that if children as young as two years old perceive themselves to be writing, a responsive writing pedagogy can only be effective following a reframing of how writing is understood in relation to children in early years' settings and homes.

Impact Statement

The findings of this research project suggest that adults' understanding of writing should be based on a sophisticated understanding of children's knowledge and capabilities within a well-informed developmental perspective. The research unearthed a discourse of writing within which participant children were active enquirers into the nature and purpose of writing; and where they were thinking, strategic writers who were developing their own theories about how the print world works. Strong, corroborated evidence exists within the established literature base to suggest that these are particular features of children from the age of three and four years old. The two-year-old participant children in this study were however also demonstrating their knowledge of how the print world works and perceiving themselves as able to write. The writing that the children produced, including those as young as two years old, became valued and interpreted in the light of this new perspective by the adults, both practitioners and parents, within the setting in which the research was undertaken. The research therefore offers evidence to suggest that children from the age of two years' old should be included when considering a more effective writing pedagogy within a pre-school setting. What the research achieved was to bring to the fore aspects of effective writing pedagogy that were already being used within the participant pre-school setting. It then enabled links to be made between these aspects and children's writing development, including scaffolded support through the use of appropriate verbal feedback. Adults became important facilitators and guides as they understood how children become intentionally more symbolic in their writing. It moved practitioners away from seeing mark making as a distinct phase which is relatively meaningless in terms of its representative value for children. They learned about what the children were writing instead. Similarly, the parent workshops revealed that the writing opportunities afforded children at home had not necessarily been understood in terms of their significance in supporting early writing development. The potential impact for early years policy and curricula is thus great. If children as young as two years old perceive themselves to be writing, there must be a reframing of how writing is understood and described in relation to children in their early years settings and homes. This could go so far as to include the removal of the term 'mark making' from the current early years lexicon of ascribed terminology, as it does not accurately describe or reflect the production of children's early writing from the age of two years' old.

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Chapter 1. Co-Constructing Writing Pedagogy with Two-and-Three-Year-old Children

1.1 Introduction to the Study

This dissertation reports a research project that began with the premise that children as young as two years old have the ability to produce, read, and use writing to purposefully convey meaning. An extensive research base, established over the past four decades, confirms that by the age of three years old children already understand at least some of the functions and purpose of writing. Research has shown for example how children of this age are capable of articulating and demonstrating their understanding of writing through deliberate, logical, and therefore planned actions and, where it is produced, the writing is ostensibly fit for purpose despite its often unconventional appearance to an adult (Bradford and Wyse, 2013). If children from the age of three years old are capably using their knowledge of writing in this way, it would make sense that their literate performances have their roots in much earlier writing experiences in that they may have already gained some appreciation of the intentional nature of writing from an even younger age. In the 1970s Kellogg for example, identified 20 distinct kinds of markings identified in what she termed the ‘graphic productions’ of children aged two years old and younger. Researchers such as Kress (1997, 2003) have more recently significantly contributed to an ongoing debate regarding the interpretation of children’s very early attempts to make meaning before they are writing conventionally.

Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that children aged two and three are beginning to demonstrate their understanding of the symbolic nature of print, the research base relating to this age group is limited in comparison to that which relates to slightly older children; thus highlighting that still relatively little is known about interactions with writing below the age of three years. Additionally, the studies that can be found focus on writing in either the home or the pre-school setting environment, with home-based research often presented in the form of case studies of individual children. Whilst studies of this kind are important and valuable in developing understanding of writing amongst the age group, and some synthesis can begin to be found amongst their findings, they remain few. To this end, the research project was located within a much less well established and somewhat emergent research base giving it significant potential to contribute therein, a factor explored in the Literature Review.

The research project can be further contextualised within increasing international interest in early childhood education, which has grown in the last decade. An important part of this interest has been early literacy development, a priority for most societies because of longitudinal studies which show a correlation between the development of literacy skills and later educational success (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2012). Whilst internationally early years curricula have been developed that reflect a policy approach of education beginning from birth, in England, the country in which the current project took place, greater prominence has recently been given in relation to two-year-olds as an age group of special interest in this respect. Since 2008 the statutory early years curriculum has included children from birth to five (DCSF, 2008), but in fact expanding pre-school

provision for two-year-olds has been a specific focus since 2012 as part of a government initiative of early education entitlement which has served to highlight the age group as a whole (DfE, 2013¹). On the one hand it would therefore follow that two-year-olds are perceived by the government as a prioritised age group with unique educational needs, thus supporting children of this age can be viewed as a positive policy development. It has been established within the realm of neuroscience for example that the emergence of communication and language skills happens during a particular window of brain development for children (see Kuhl, 2004). In this respect children's experiences from birth to three years old are critical in relation to longer-term outcomes as certain fundamental skills are subject to time specific development. Yet this is a government initiative of early education entitlement which I would argue serves to highlight a particular social construction of the child under this strand of the Funded Twos initiative (Moss, 2010). The pre-school provision the initiative describes is primarily intended for a group of children covered by the term 'Funded Twos'. They are the recipients of a targeted government policy intervention aimed at "lower income families" for whom the local authority has a statutory charge to identify to take up a free early education place (DfE, 2013, p.2). As Moss (2010) argues, our view of the child is socially constructed within particular contexts which then underpin policy approaches. It therefore follows that the current Funded Twos approach begins with a deficit pedagogical model in line for example with Malaguzzi's (1993) understanding of the 'poor' cultural child; the child for whom it is assumed additional support will, by default, be required. As Funded Twos places can be determined by family income alone, this policy approach ascribes an assumptive deficit perspective in relation to socioeconomic status, but from September 2014 free early education for up to fifteen hours a week was provided in England for as many as 40% of two-year-olds.

Socioeconomic status aside, from a pedagogical perspective it would follow that if two-year-olds are indeed perceived as a prioritised age group with unique educational needs (albeit from the government starting point of a deficit perspective), then this would include their writing development; indeed, the current statutory early years curriculum covering children from birth to five years includes Writing as one specific area of literacy learning (DfE, 2014). Recent studies have looked at quality education for two year olds in England (see Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, and Ereky-Stevens, 2014), but whilst helpful, these studies are general in their overview in that there is no reference to individual curriculum areas. One of the reasons for this might be because many would not consider whether children from this age group are able to write in ways that reflect the regularities associated with conventional writing systems a reasonable question to ask (Lancaster, 2007, p.125). However, if evidence can be found in the literature base for characteristics of writing such as intentionality amongst two year olds then this is significant for the current research project, because it gives weight to the argument for the need to develop appropriate pedagogic interventions by educators built on positive understanding of children's capabilities. This relates to Malaguzzi's (1993, p.10) converse notion of

¹ The Funded Twos initiative additionally targets 'looked after' and SEND children from the age of two years old. A child can also be entitled to free early education and childcare if they are the subject of a special guardianship order, child arrangements order or adoption order. This dissertation focuses on the element of the initiative relating to funded twos and disadvantage from a socioeconomic perspective.

the 'rich' child, a child who is not 'rich' materially, but rather "rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children". This approach is in direct contrast to the social construction of the early years child who must follow a predetermined path set out by adults through policy and curricula, which, as Moss (2010) argues, only serves to stifle the potential of the 'rich' child because they become increasingly stunted by predetermined outcomes. In short, if children are engaging with writing at this age, investigating appropriate writing pedagogies would therefore seem worthwhile for optimum learning in this area of the curriculum to take place.

The research project additionally built on an understanding of writing as a developmental process whereby children learn to write conventionally over a period of time, usually years. It is one in which adults can play a key role and incorporates two main elements; writing skills development (the development of fine motor skills including hand-eye coordination and the physical ability to successfully manipulate a chosen writing tool), and compositional skills development (the cognitive processes involved in understanding and applying organisational elements such as genre, grammar and spelling to effectively communicate meaning). Such a developmental approach is partly incorporated within the structure of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) in England, the statutory framework encompassing the learning and development of children from birth to five years, and where statements regarding 'milestone' expectations at various ages can be found for all areas of the early years curriculum. The compositional element of writing is incorporated within Writing which is included as an aspect of Literacy (the other aspect being Reading). For Writing, the early focus is on children developing their listening skills and their competence with spoken language in order to be able to later write down the words that they say through accurate application of their ever increasing phonic knowledge. Children need to (eventually) learn how to associate and transcribe its sounds and aligning symbols when creating a written message that they expect to be read. The second important element of being able to write, described in this dissertation as skills development, involves the gradual refining of children's gross and then fine motor skills and their hand-eye coordination in order to enable the successful manipulation of a writing tool. This element is located within Physical Development, one of three prime areas of learning perceived as fundamental to a child's later educational success (DfE, 2014, p.10). Physical Development in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) states that children's end outcomes by the age of five years should show "good control and co-ordination in large and small movements... They handle equipment and tools effectively, including pencils for writing". By the age of five years they should be able to "use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed" (Early Education, 2012, p.24), thus incorporating a somewhat narrow definition in our 21st century digital age of writing as a technical skill undertaken within the context of paper-based media. It is important to recognise that the nature of literacy in the 21st century is changing, and the rapid rise of developments in technology means that digitised media in particular now permeate children's literary writing experiences from a very young age, beginning with experiences in the home (Davidson, 2011). Many young children now enter their early years in education as competent and frequent users of digital technology; for example Levy's (2009) research, undertaken with children aged between 3 and 6 years' old, suggests that the medium of computer technology

encourages young children to develop both understandings about texts and the skills needed to read them. I would argue in the context of digital technology this argument extends into text production, thus prompting traditional perspectives of writing to be challenged, where writing has now become a broad and complex skill extending far beyond the ability to encode printed text within paper-based media.

Yet the EYFS (DfE, 2014), still retains a focus on writing as a paper-and-pen based activity. In this respect, it recognises that learning to write conventionally occurs over a period of time and embraces different phases, additionally distinguishes a child's early attempts at writing (as opposed to the production of conventional text) between the ages of 16 to 36 months. Early attempts are described as mark making, a well-established term since the 1980's, and originally conceived as a way of acknowledging that pre-school children sometimes use a visually representative mode which is clearly distinguishable from drawing when communicating meaning on paper. Following this line of thinking, writing is portrayed as a rather precise, technical, and, more significantly, age-related skill. It is also fundamentally a phenomenon that can only occur once a child has developed a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between spoken sounds and graphic symbols and can represent these accurately on the page.

Developmental perspectives have become established in the literature base, particularly by seminal researchers such as Clay (1975) and Goodman (1986). Early interactions with writing have often been referred to as emergent literacy, a term which was developed in the 1980s to describe writing behaviours that precede and develop into conventional literacy (see for example Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Emergent approaches acknowledge that children gradually develop their knowledge about the functions of and purposes for written language in multiple ways, primarily through experience within their communities, their families, and their early childhood settings. Emergent approaches reflect a trajectory of development that includes ever greater precision and increasingly 'accurate' reproductions of written text. The term 'emergent' is important; it acknowledges that whilst young children are not able to write conventionally and are therefore not yet conventional writers in that their writing cannot be read automatically by fluent readers of the child's spoken language, they are however beginning to apply principles of writing to practice, however rudimentary their initial attempts might first appear. This highlights a second main premise behind the researcher's thinking and understanding that shaped the research project; that whatever their age, the written marks children make should always be considered as representationally significant, to be interpreted as such. It is therefore based upon the researcher's construction of the child as socially competent and highly communicative.

How parents support their children's literacy development from the age of three years old is comprehensively documented in the research base, particularly in relation to reading. Less evidence can be found in relation to the development of writing however. Another aim of the research project therefore was to develop greater understanding of the influence of parenting practices (parents' actions, behaviours, and ways of thinking) on children's writing development. Evidence suggests that parents' personal goals for their children are influenced by their perceptions of their own values and their child's specific needs. Parent perceptions of

their children as writers might not only impact on the environment and ethos for writing that they provide within the home, but also on the types of social interactions that ensue as a result of those perceptions. Translating this to the current study, it was hypothesised that if parents understood the nature of their young children writing, it might well impact on the perceptions of both in a positive light, enabling writing to be seen as a competence that would eventually be mastered and which could be effectively supported from an early age. Significantly there are as yet no single studies that explore the relationship between home and pre-school setting writing practices within the research base for two-year-olds, a specific area of research investigation that has received significant attention amongst children aged three and above (see for example Marsh, 2010). The research project therefore aimed to further explore the nature of writing from the age of two, looking closely at how children are beginning to express themselves and shape meaning through their developing knowledge and understanding of the written word; but doing so in the context of both the home and pre-school environments.

In summary, building on evidence to suggest that children as young as two years old are beginning to understand the symbolic nature of print, this dissertation documents a research project which involved the discovery of writing practice, incorporating conceptualisations of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children and their parents, and the pedagogical approaches of their pre-school setting. It achieved this through adopting a twofold process of co-construction of knowledge; first, by seeking a clear understanding of what children of this age already knew about the functions and purpose of writing, and why. Second, it sought to develop joint understanding amongst parents and the early years practitioners within the children's pre-school setting of how two-and-three-year-olds express themselves through writing. The intention was to build on that joint understanding in relation to what was discovered, and so to seek potential alignment in the provision of optimal early writing experiences, both in their pre-school setting and at home. In considering closer alignment between writing environments and approaches in the children's homes and pre-school setting, it did not assume a process which was necessarily considered from the sole perspective of the setting as the assumed 'expert' in driving a child's agenda for writing. Whilst the writing curriculum might reflect the rationale behind current thinking and practice at both a national level in terms of its content and at a localised level in terms of how it is interpreted and organised within individual pre-school settings, this might have differed from the perspectives of the parents and children involved in the study. Developing a strategy of co-construction of knowledge would therefore begin with the potential to enable all stakeholders to make connections between pre-school setting and home-setting writing knowledge and skills. The intent was that through such a process of discovery and co-construction of knowledge, the potential for creating the optimum pre-school setting and home-setting writing environments could be established for children from the age of two years and above. Indeed, when considering the notion of alignment of understandings of writing pedagogy, an outcome of the current study might be a closer approximation for the type of writing interactions that children experience in the pre-school setting and at home. The overall aim of the research project was to contribute to knowledge about the nature of young children's writing, and knowledge about pedagogies in home and early childhood education settings that are likely to

support their writing development. It was structured using the following research questions:

1. What are the synergies and tensions between writing pedagogy in an early years pre-school setting and two-and-three-year-old children writing at home?
 - a. What are children's, parents', and practitioners' conceptualisations of early writing?
 - b. How is early writing supported in the pre-school setting and at home?
2. How can practitioners' and parents' understandings of children's early writing practices lead to changes in writing pedagogy in the early years pre-school setting and approaches to writing at home?
 - a. What is the rationale for changes in writing pedagogy?

The dissertation is presented in six main chapters (including this one). Chapter Two, the Literature Review, presents an overview of relevant research on the development of children's writing, defining key terms from the literature base and outlining the theoretical framing of the research project. Chapter Two discusses the complexities of children learning to write, exploring what is already known about writing as a developmental process through a systematic collation and synthesis of empirical studies. Chapter Three outlines the case study research design used, including methods of data collection and the thematic approach applied to data analysis. It includes a reflexive account of the role of the researcher and appropriate ethical considerations for working with children as young as two years old. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study from the perspectives of the key stakeholders involved and outlines synergies and tensions between children's writing in the pre-school and home settings therein. Chapter Five, the Discussion chapter, presents a summary of key findings and discusses the implications of these in relation to successes and limitations of the research project, including the project's original contribution to the field. The chapter includes critique relating to further surprise outcomes of the research project for the children, their parents, and the early years practitioners involved. A justification for the potential impact of increased understanding of early writing development for effective early years pedagogy is outlined. Finally, conclusions are drawn, along with tentative recommendations for further research in the area of young children's early engagement with writing.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview

The review of literature presented in this chapter involved a search for English-medium research published in the last ten years relating to children as young as two years old within the following databases: ERIC, Ebsco, the British Education Index and the Australian Education Index. Searches of academic journals that were thought might highlight knowledge with specific relevance to the key foci of the study, for example *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, were additionally chosen to scrutinise. The chapter begins by investigating historical and theoretical conceptualisations of writing in order to reach a definition on which to build subsequent discussion. It outlines the premise of a developmental approach in learning to write which begins with early explorations of the functions and form of writing and culminates in the eventual ability to use conventional text. The Review then goes on to describe the Foucaultian framework adopted for critically analysing discourse of writing two-and-three-year-old children within this dissertation, exploring the role of government, policy, and the English statutory early years curriculum in influencing adult conceptualisations of writing and writing pedagogy in the classroom. In this dissertation a ‘discourse of writing’ is defined as conceptualisations of writing, incorporating both adults’ and children’s beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and responses to writing (Ivanic, 2004). As young children engage in a discourse of writing their understanding of the form and purpose of writing can be seen emerging through graphic representations on the page, representations which will become increasingly accurate in terms of their conventional nature over time. Such a premise therefore incorporates their early understanding of the communicative nature of print and the functions it performs, including the permanence of written text. The chapter locates the child within such a discourse and discusses constructs of freedom and agency relating to writing therein whilst at the same time questioning the culture behind the thinking and interpretation that perpetuates writing practice within educational settings. This includes a consideration of the impact of a current government focus on free pre-school setting places for two-year-old children and recent reviews describing features of a quality education for this age group. A section on the complexities of learning to write follows, beginning with a discussion of writing as a competence that develops over time, aligning with a developmental approach. The chapter then focuses on the development of writing from the age of two, both summarising and reflecting on the limited literature base for this age group. A section on writing in the home environment sets up an argument for the need to develop home and pre-school setting communication and links, and leads into a discussion on possible tenets of effective writing pedagogy in early years pre-school settings.

2.2 Conceptualising Writing

Approaches to literacy education are usually underpinned by particular ways of conceptualising writing in terms of what writing actually is, and by particular ways of conceptualising how writing can be learned. Such conceptualisations manifest themselves in the policy, curricula and pedagogic approaches of the time (Ivanic, 2004). If writing is conceptualised as the use of conventional text to convey meaning for example, then children must learn to accurately reproduce letters or symbols that represent a writing system and know how to put letters together to accurately spell words that can be read; it therefore follows that writing policy, curricula and pedagogy would involve adult conceptualisations of how best to teach children to do this. Pursuing this line of thinking, different ways of conceptualising writing lie at the heart of ‘discourses’ in the broadest sense where discourse incorporates recognisable associations among values, beliefs and practices which lead to particular forms of situated action; to particular decisions, choices and omissions, as well as to particular wordings (Ivanic, 2004, p.220). The starting point for this dissertation was that children are able to grasp and utilise writing at a younger age than adults might otherwise recognise or expect (Klein, 1982); thus, adult conceptualisations of writing impact on responses to children’s early attempts at using it to communicate meaningfully. An historical conceptualisation of writing is rooted in a fundamental assumption that it could only be developed as the result of age-appropriate, systematic school instruction; thus negating any recognition of children writing independently before this point, and incorporating a notion of writing as only being writing when it is formed of conventional text. To this end, some early years educators have distinguished between ‘real’ and ‘pretend’ writing (see Tolchinsky, 2003). It is important from the outset to additionally make a distinction between writing and handwriting. In England, children are taught handwriting skills from the age of six years (DfE, 2014). Handwriting is however different from writing in that handwriting practice involves children learning how to form a fluent writing style through being taught effective ways to reproduce letters; in other words, the graphic symbols that represent the English alphabet. This is distinct from using writing as a means of producing meaningful communication.

Vygotsky (1978, p.114) acknowledged that children were creating meaning using what he termed “the symbolics of writing” from the age of three years old. What he meant by this was that children were trying to communicate on paper using marks that were clearly distinct from drawing and which might have some intentional purpose. Vygotsky’s observations drew on the work of Luria, who pursued the study of writing development in Russian children aged three to nine years. Luria (1929) found that when asked to reproduce a sentence or phrase on paper, children who were not yet writing conventionally could be encouraged to do so, resulting in them using a writing-like script. Luria (1929) discovered patterns in the children’s attempts at writing, noting that different types of script could be classified commensurate with the children’s age. He drew the conclusion that writing began long before they were shown how to form letters by a teacher, thus concluding that writing was an evolutionary process (1929, p.145). Elsewhere in the world Hildreth’s (1936) ground breaking paper in the United States outlined potential developmental stages in writing through an analysis of name writing skills in three and four-year-old children. Citing just ten associated references spanning the period 1910 to 1934,

Hildreth's (1936) paper made a case for young children needing more time to explore their ideas about writing independently with a pencil and paper before beginning formal instruction. The impact of early research into the beginning stages of writing such as that of Luria (1929) and Hildreth (1936) made no headway in changing conceptualisations of writing or pedagogical practice at the time, however such findings are now corroborated within an extensive literature base showing indeed that children do not wait until school age before beginning to write. Research in this area began to gather momentum in the 1980s, gaining significant attention towards the end of the decade and leading to a reconceptualisation of young children writing, particularly children from the age of three years. Seminal influential researchers included Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982), Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984), and Teale and Sulzby (1986). Studies such as these acknowledged children's early attempts at writing and reinforced sociocultural approaches to development and learning where the child's environment plays a key role. Here, children try out for themselves writing behaviour that they have observed, for example. In this respect, they are not only experimenting with written text, but also attempting to produce written text to create meaning.

Revised understanding of children's early engagement with writing has led to researchers from various disciplines offering a range of theoretical frameworks for how children learn to write. Underpinning these is the concept of a developmental pathway towards conventional writing; just as children do not begin to talk by speaking in complex utterances, or decode by reading a novel, neither do children begin to write by producing complete sentences (Puranik, Lonigan and Kim, 2011). A developmental approach argues that children pass through stages characterised by writing behaviour typical of their age. Clay (1975, p.15) described writing as a phenomenon that developed along a continuum, the starting point of which began with children making "gross approximations" on paper once they understood the concept that spoken messages could be written down. According to Clay (1975; 1993), gross approximations become gradually more refined as children's knowledge about writing increases, with more advanced concepts emerging out of earlier understandings. She therefore argues that dismissing a child's efforts to put marks on paper could potentially lead to missing their current understanding of writing. Ferreiro (1986) described the same phenomenon where children move gradually through successive levels of increased knowledge and conceptualisation about writing. Dyson (2001) also described children's writing as following a developmental pathway from less sophisticated to more sophisticated writing, or encoding, and Tolchinsky (2003, p.55) wrote of what children know and understand on their path to "alphabetic writing". Calkins (1983, 1986) states that as children move through developmental stages of writing they are experiencing firsthand the powerful discovery that print carries meaning. What this developmental line of thinking suggests is that whilst children's early attempts at writing cannot be described as conventional, they are at least experimenting with its form and shape, and at best using it purposefully for their own, considered reasons. This might also include writing messages with the intention that they can be read by others (Bloodgood, 1999). Tolchinsky (2014) emphasises that as children engage in the act of writing and experimenting with print in this way that children gradually (and eventually) learn to write conventionally.

In the 1980s, the term emergent literacy, where emergent implies a gradual process of development, began to be used as a term which gave recognition to the reading and writing behaviours of young children that preceded and developed into conventional literacy (see Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Hall, 1987). It is a term which is still in current use today and reflects an established body of research evidence to show that children enter their pre-school settings with at least some skill and knowledge of both reading and writing. Two important concepts underpin an emergent perspective: first, young children are literate beings from birth; and second, it incorporates an element of growing metacognitive awareness in young children, perceiving them to be active enquirers into the nature and purposes of literacy (Wray, 1994; Jacobs, 2005). The emergent perspective is therefore in line with a construction of the child as capable and competent in the same way that Malaguzzi's (1993, p.10) 'rich' child is an active learner, capable of seeking the meaning of the world from birth, and a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture, and values. In relation to writing therefore, emergent literacy offers a view of children as having relatively little experience of writing, rather than being unable to write. Their inexperience does not however preclude them from experimenting with text, or feeling that their genuine attempts at communicating meaningfully in this way are there to be read. Wells Rowe (2012) found that analysis of children's unconventional texts suggested that young children's authoring processes are not qualitatively different from those used by older writers for example. An emergent approach thus involved an original reconceptualisation of children's early attempts at writing, allowing for the fact that whilst they might not be able to reproduce recognisable letters, they might actually attribute meaning to marks on the page or produce letter-like shapes that again are meaningful and in their mind convey a written message. They will certainly understand the difference between writing and drawing and that each as a separate mode of notation represents a different way of visually recording meaning. In summary, an emergent approach encompasses early attempts at unaided writing where children explore its forms and functions in line with their own developing hypotheses and growing understanding about how the print world works (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982).

Other research, built on sociocultural theory, shows that children's earliest discoveries about written language are learned through active engagement with both their social and cultural worlds (Rowe, 1994; Gee 2001; Barratt-Pugh, 2002). It therefore makes sense that by living and participating in an environment in which others use print for various purposes, children will naturally infer the semiotic and functional nature of written language (Purcell-Gates, 1986, p.426). Children's writing therefore occurs wherever writing practice is occurring; initially in their homes and communities through interacting in writing situations. A key way that children learn about writing is therefore through observation of individuals who are more experienced writers than themselves (Purcell-Gates, 1986). Another key feature of sociocultural theory is that an individual's higher order functions develop out of social interaction with a more knowledgeable person, either a significant adult (such as a parent or carer) or a peer or sibling. Vygotsky (1978) argued that it is when such social interaction with a more competent member of society occurs that cultural knowledge is transmitted to an individual who is in turn able to internalise and incorporate new ideas and concepts into their existing repertoire. Neuman and Roskos (1997) suggested that participation in writing practice represents an

important part of learning because children come to understand that print is meaningful and such participation enables them to practice what written language is for and how it works. Embedding writing experiences in meaningful activity in this way they argue, models several distinctive features about it for children such as the fact that written text conveys a message; words are used to write; individual letters are used to write or spell those words; and, in English, texts read from left to right. Rowe (2003) argues that it is within such culturally embedded contexts as a result of individual and shared exploration that children are able to test their hypotheses about the forms and functions of written language in situational contexts from a very early age, using their emergent approaches. Sociocultural theories therefore explain that children's differing perceptions and motivation to write could be attributed to different levels of exposure to and experiences of writing in the cultural contexts of their home and community (Pellegrini, 2001, Compton Lilley, 2006).

Emergent literacy approaches and sociocultural theories of literary development both support a picture of young children actively engaged in constructing their own knowledge about writing; which by default must imply the involvement of a cognitive thinking element. As Wray (1994, p.56) argues, learning to write is a thinking process and therefore an awareness of what one is doing is an essential component of the process. Cognitive aspects in relation to presenting a written message can be broken down further to include thinking about, then processing and deciding how to graphically communicate to others through this medium. This is a phenomenon that has been found to be common across all cultures and indeed universal patterns of behaviour have emerged reflecting a common set of cognitive processing decisions on the part of children as they test their hypotheses and ideas about writing (Levin and Bus, 2003; Scheuer, de la Cruz, Pozo, Echenique and Márquez, 2006; Yang and Noel, 2006). Tolchinsky (2003) pointed out that one cultural limitation to this observation might have been in relation to Chinese script which presents as a complex system of characters (as opposed to letters). For many Chinese communities she argued, the notion of children writing without prior teaching would be alien because of a presumption that it is a skill that can only be achieved through learning by rote. Chan and Nunes (1998) however investigated understanding of the formal and functional aspects of written Chinese amongst children between the ages of 4 and 9 years old. They concluded that learning to write in Chinese is not simply accomplished by the rote memorisation of individual characters; rather as children progress in learning becoming more experienced as writers they develop an understanding of the underlying rules of written Chinese, applying the same cognitive processing approaches as documented across other cultures. Additionally, Chan, Zi Juan and Lai Foon (2008) found that despite children in Hong Kong being explicitly taught to write at a very young age, in some pre-schools teachers have begun to change the writing curriculum and make a distinction between emergent and conventional writing. Developing the cognitive relationship between the child and contexts for writing is therefore very important if they are to become motivated writers and perceive themselves as able to write. Indeed, research such as that of Scheuer et al., (2006) on kindergarten and primary school children's conceptions of learning to write reveal what children themselves think about the process and how they locate themselves within such a discourse. This study involved interviewing a total 60 children attending kindergarten or primary education in public schools in Argentina (children from Kindergarten, Grade 1 and

Grade 4, ages four, five, six and nine years overall). Findings revealed that children had developed clear ideas about the aims, requirements, content, and characteristics of writing, and significantly were able to articulate those conceptions. All the children involved in the study were able to give accounts of learning to write, including for the older children an increasing awareness of the emergent stages that they progressed through en route to the complexities of conventional writing. Conversely, the younger children were able to demonstrate how they felt their writing would change for the better as they grew older. Significantly, whilst the Kindergarten children involved in the study were unconcerned about the technicalities of producing conventional writing, those in Grade 1 showed a focus on writing output in line with what they were receiving in terms of formal writing instruction in school. These children were more concerned with the secretarial aspects of writing, in other words producing conventional writing that was acceptable and spelt correctly. Those in Grade 4 however gave responses which reflected an adjustment to, and an understanding of, conventional writing along with an emphasis on the ability to convey meaning to the reader. It is research such as this that clearly reinforces the developmental nature of writing. Significantly, the children in Scheuer et al., 's (2006) study were able to articulate their conceptions (Scheuer et al.'s (2006) term) of writing themselves. Research such as this suggests that children should not be underestimated in their capability to write (and in so doing demonstrating their understanding of the process of learning to write, including its forms and functions); but neither should their ability to talk about the writing that they engage in be underestimated.

What such theoretical frameworks have in common is a response to, and an explanation of, how children begin to engage with the writing process, but also how they perceive themselves as writers. Within such theoretical framing different terms have additionally been used to describe young children's writing. Tolchinsky's (2003) path to alphabetic writing has already been mentioned for example. Clay (1975) referred to children's early attempts to write as beginning writing behaviour, a term which also supports a line of thinking in relation to their ability to utilise their existing knowledge about writing in order to communicate via print. Martello (2001; 2004) used the term precompetence in the same way. Clay (1975)'s description of children's writing as beginning with 'gross approximations' is significant from this decade, as even if they were recognised as such, children's early attempts at writing were typically described as mere 'scribble' by the adult observer; in other words, purposeless, random marks without any real meaning attached to them. This was because they made no sense from a conventional perspective, leading researchers such as Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984, p.178) to famously conclude that "in scribbles is the origin of the written sign". Their use of the term scribble was not however used to dismiss what children were doing; the authors were in fact taking an enlightened approach. Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) discovered for example that children of this age were already making planned organisational decisions about their writing and that they wrote with an expectation that the marks they made would make sense; in other words, they were writing with intentionality, a characteristic of the writing process. Similarly, Matthews (1999, p.19) argued that children's scribbles were products of their systematic investigation rather than random or meaningless unintentional marks. I would argue that in this respect intentionality can be described as being synonymous with meaning, which is important as it forces a re-

conceptualisation of the term ‘scribble’ and the need for a better way to describe children’s early attempts at communication on paper. Goodman (1986) has argued that children from the even earlier age of two engage in writing tasks for a wide variety of reasons and that most have begun to use symbols to represent real things such as names and objects. In more recent research Lancaster (2007) investigated the use of “intentional signs” (p.126) amongst a group of 10 children aged between 18 to 30 months and found that children under the age of two are able to distinguish between writing, drawing, and number, based on the child’s experience and perceptions of how each of these three domains represents meaning. Evidence of intentionality at such young ages is significant because it suggests first that children are engaging with a discourse of writing early on in their lives, but second, if this is in fact what they are doing, it necessitates appropriate intervention by adults built on positive understandings of children’s capabilities.

From the perspective of social semiotics Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p.17) argued that the signs which children make are, despite their differences from conventional forms, fully meaningful in every sense. What research such as this shows however is that how children’s early writing is interpreted or understood is to a considerable extent prescribed by our adult knowledge of graphic systems. A term which has emerged in England to describe children’s early engagement with the writing process and which appears in the current statutory early years curriculum (DfE, 2014) is mark making. Mark making, whilst somewhat removed from the term ‘scribble’ is still not perceived as ‘real’ writing however in that it cannot be read conventionally by an adult. Mark making is an expectancy amongst children aged between 30 to 50 months to which they might sometimes ascribe meaning to the ‘marks’ produced which are different from drawing. It is also a term created by adults. When terms such as mark making are used to describe children’s early writing I would argue that it further polarises adult understanding through not giving sufficient acknowledgement to what they [children] are achieving in their efforts to communicate via the written word. Significantly, it cannot be used when adults and children talk together about writing because a child would never describe themselves as mark making; nor would they understand what an adult meant if they asked them if this is what they were doing. Mark making is therefore not part of a child’s language repertoire, thus alienating them somewhat from a discourse of writing development that they might actually be leading and creating. This dissertation argues that instead of describing children’s writing using terms such as mark making (which additionally assumes a deficit perspective that focuses on what they are not getting right about writing due to a default perception of real writing as conventional text, or suggesting that they are simply too young to write), this developmental phase should be described in terms of how children are using writing from the age of two and what their writing output might look like in terms of graphic representation. In other words, it is far more accurate to simply use the term writing to both describe and interpret the intentional nature of the ‘marks’ that they make. Children’s early writing may therefore be described as “the familiarity with writing implements, conventions, and emerging skills to communicate attitudes and ideas through written representations, symbols, and letters” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, p.15). In summary the term ‘writing’ is used throughout this dissertation to describe children’s deliberate graphic communication at two and three years’ old, where the children perceived themselves to be writing. The exception to

this is where an alternative term is used within a cited research study.

2.3 Framing and Analysing Discourses of Writing: A Foucaultian Approach

A framework embedding Foucault's philosophical notions of truth, knowledge, and power relations was used to develop both interpretive and critical analysis throughout the duration of the research project. To this end the development of such a framework, in itself a personal interpretation of Foucault's writing, was twofold. First, it emerged alongside a desire to accurately understand and make sense of the writing that two-and-three-year old children might be engaging in at home and within their pre-school setting (the children's discourse of writing). Second, it supported the potential for enabling transformational change where it might be advantageous to do so, for example in terms of how adults might respond pedagogically to children's early attempts at writing. Fundamental to a Foucaultian approach is the notion of discourse, where discourse encompasses the conceptualisations of individuals in relation to aspects or phenomena associated with their world (Veyne, 2010). The aspect or phenomenon of the world under investigation in this dissertation is writing, where the discourse of writing incorporates children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing.

Foucault (1970) questioned so-called reality, or the status quo, his personal notion of discourse incorporating understanding and explaining why individuals in society behave in the way they do in relation to a given phenomenon. Foucault goes further however in that he then challenges the individual to look for and isolate the reasons behind their own actions within any known discourse. In this way discourse is made explicit because it involves an interpretation not only of what people do and say alongside an understanding of the assumptions that underlie their actions and words, but also of their institutions (Veyne, 2010, p.15). Foucault (1977) viewed the school or educational setting as one such example of an institution. Foucault (1970, p.64) further argued that "any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the power and knowledge they carry". He wrote of power, but particularly in his later writing thought that it was wrong to consider it as something that institutions possessed and would use oppressively against individuals and groups (Peters, 2004). Foucault made a case for the importance of discovery of the truth behind any discourse. He challenged whether the truth surrounding a phenomenon actually corresponded to its object or not. Truth, he argued, could be an assumed or accepted reality by those participants within it, rather than the actual or true reality; for example, (and particularly in his later works) he remained sceptical of a neoliberal society which professed freedom and choice for those living within it, whilst perceiving governments as maintaining a system of hierarchical control (Olssen, 2014). In this way the discovery of truth, Foucault (1970) argued, could enable new understanding, capable of beginning a process that might lead to subtle shifts of power between those who are part of a particular discourse. It includes free choice in that it is up to the individual to shift their position within the discourse, but only if they desire to do so. He therefore viewed free choice as an empowering feature of an individual's response as opposed to a militant or anarchic one, in that free choice could enable a discourse to be challenged and gradually changed from within rather than bringing it to an end.

On a cautionary note, it has been argued that it is only in recent years that “substantial analyses” utilising Foucaultian approaches to educational issues have emerged (Olssen, 2014, p.219). Significantly, whilst there are many references to education and the school throughout Foucault’s work, he did not write a specific text dedicated solely to this field. This is in comparison with other works by Foucault devoted to subjects such as madness, health, knowledge, crime, sexuality, and identity (Deacon, 2006). A discussion of education and the school as institution does however occur in Chapter 2 of Part III of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977). The chapter is entitled ‘The Means of Correct Training’ in which the school is alluded to as an institution designed as a place of political intervention and surveillance and a place which serves as a means of controlling the populace through the knowledge (in the form of curriculum content) they transmit and the pedagogical approaches they take. Foucault (1977, p.171-2) described the institution in general as a place of situated practice, whose purpose it was “to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them”. Further impacting the notion of surveillance and control, Foucault compares the architecture of the school to a prison, including classrooms running off a central corridor in the same way as individual cells (1977, p.172-3). This is what he referred to as panoptic surveillance, where the regulation of citizens is achieved through a means of constant surveillance. In relation to children, the early years curriculum, and writing, constant surveillance has become internalised through its encompassment within the expectations of the early learning goal for writing. Here, there is a clear statement about what the government expects children to achieve by the age of five years’ old, embedded within an additional statutory requirement for data to prove that the requisite progress has been made.

Central to the interpretive framework for this dissertation therefore is a conceptualisation of pre-school settings, their purpose, and the complexities of relationships between stakeholders involved therein; from the government which develops statutory writing curricula, to the educational setting itself which must adopt and implement the appropriate curriculum, to the pedagogical approaches that emerge as a result of early years curriculum content and government policy, to the ensuing impact on those who are educated within the pre-school setting, or the ‘institution’ (Veyne, 2010). Ball (2012, p.6) argues that the focus of much of Foucault’s work focuses on such complexity of practices, on power relations and on the problem of government. Following this line of thinking, the parameters that define the discourse of writing within an educational setting would incorporate reasons that both constrain or enable it (Ball, 2012). In this way a discourse of truth about what writing is in the early years, and what it is not, has become established. Within the EYFS (DfE, 2014), the discourse of truth about writing is that it must be conventional for it to be real writing; otherwise it is mere mark making. Not only that, written words must be spelt correctly through the application of phonic knowledge and understanding. Writing is a technical skill; it involves precision in forming letters correctly and the construction of short sentences that an adult can read. This conceptualisation of writing is further embedded within government policy documents such as *Mark Making Matters* (DCSF, 2008), a document which on the one hand acknowledges that children might be thinking that they are trying to write from a young age, and using marks to communicate meaningfully (see p.3 for

example), but on the other states that what they produce on the page is not real writing, hence the paradoxical title of the document which serves to act as a powerful construct of truth and knowledge about what writing is and what it is not for those who work with children from the age of three years old. Another government-endorsed document provides mapped guidance for parents on their children's learning to the EYFS (DfE, 2014), entitled "What to Expect When" (4Children, 2015). Between the ages of 16 to 26 months, the guidance states "let me make lots of marks using chunky pencils/crayons/chalks" (4Children, 2015, p.15). Between 22 to 36 months it states, "when you're writing lists or filling in forms let me have my own paper or forms so that I can make my own marks" (4Children, 2015, p. 19). From 30 to 50 months, the guidance states that children might be able to copy their own name, however it is only between the ages of 40 to 60 months that the word "writing" is used to describe children's written output. I argue therefore in relation to Foucaultian interpretations of truth and knowledge, that both the early years curriculum and government-endorsed documentation have the power to act as a controlled means by which so-called norms in relation to discourse of writing are perpetuated in the early years. This is further supported by an interventionist approach which incorporates the labelling of a child from the beginning of their education at the age of two years, which creates the notion of an automatically assumed deficit perspective due to their socioeconomic status.

Foucault's ideas regarding the ways in which human beings are constituted as subjects within society, a phenomenon that can involve shifting power relations, provided another aspect to the framework for investigating and understanding how children and the adults involved in their lives conceptualised and experienced writing; in other words, the means of discovering and interpreting actual (rather than assumed or perceived) discourse of writing and drawing together notions of truth and power. For Foucault, it was impossible to separate truth from power. He argued that the most that can be done is to detach "the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault, 1980, p.3). For Foucault, power in society appears invisible, yet it is present in a matrix of relations at a given time in a given place and therefore power in relation to any given phenomena has its place within an historical context (Olsen, 2014). Foucault (1980, p.133) argued that truth in relation to every discourse, where truth is "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, circulation and operation of statements", must first be unearthed in order for it to be understood and to effect any necessary change. To this end, the research supported a closely observed journey of discovery and revelation regarding both children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing. It allowed children in particular to reveal what they knew and understood about writing (their ordered procedures). It also allowed them to demonstrate not only the knowledge that they already had, but how they applied it in everyday contexts; or to put this into the Foucaultian terms described above, the production, regulation, circulation and operation of statements. The same applied to the adults involved in their lives where it was hypothesised that adult conceptualisations of writing might impact on how they responded to the children's own writing discourse; thus the research additionally sought to discover and interpret discourse of writing both within the children's homes and within their pre-school setting. There is a growing concern for example within the early childhood education sector to empower parents to support the education of their young children (Yuen,

2011). In the context of the current research it would make sense for parents to know how best to support their children's writing at home; similarly, in relation to effective pedagogical approaches in an early years setting. Foucault (2002, p.43) himself described writing as a phenomenon that "harbours the truth". It was only through understanding the truth behind the production and meaning of such discourse, that would allow the potential to effect justified change to writing practice for the children, should change indeed be necessary. Echoing arguments in relation to effective writing pedagogy, a broad example of this might be that through altered perspectives and new understandings or knowledge adults might know how to better resource the optimum writing environment for children in order to better accommodate their writing discourse.

In the Foucaultian framing for my research, constructs of freedom and agency on the part of the children involved are integral, enabling them, or empowering them, to produce their own discourse of writing "involving truths" based on greater individual perceptions of the self as a writer (Peters, 2004, p.54). In order for this to happen however, adults need to understand children as writers. Foucaultian precepts of self are, as Besley (2005) suggests, synonymous with an understanding of, or knowing, one's identity. This links to an argument presented in this literature review in relation to how sociocultural identity can shape individual literacy practice (Compton-Lilly, 2006). Both perceiving and responding to children as the writers they perceive themselves to be, and to understand their approaches in the context of literacy experience was seen as crucial in the development of writing as a competence and motivation to write (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994). Understanding a child's interests to create meaningful contexts for writing was an integral element of such an approach.

Across all of his writing, Foucault did not claim to teach the reader what to think, instead challenging them in relation to *how* to think, or rather to question the status quo. This provides an interesting way of interpreting established educational practice where embedded precepts and 'accepted' curricula might be perceived as deliberately involving regulation and governance of individual experience by the political power in rule (Foucault, 1970, Besley, 2005). Foucault (1970) described this phenomenon as the 'governmentality' of society, specifically the way the population and individuals within it are being overseen. Foucault (1982) used the term 'conduct of conduct' to describe this phenomenon, perceiving it to be the central problem of the modern neoliberal government. As Iverson and Painter (2005) argue, "the very idea of liberal government involves a paradox: liberalism asserts the sovereignty of the free individual, yet government requires that individual behaviour be regulated and modified..." In its harshest terms the conduct of conduct is the equivalent of state control. It can also be perceived as a way to produce "useful, docile, practical citizens" (Besley, 2005, p.77); in other words, it is a phenomenon where people not only become subjects, but also subject themselves to a passive acceptance of what is perceived to be the norm. The concept covers "the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Foucault 2003, p.41). In this respect two main options are available to the individual. They either intrinsically feel that they are taking the right approach because of their belief in the rhetoric; or whilst

they may feel that something is not quite right they do not question the discourse beneath the surface level.

Foucault's interpretation of how he approached the notion of truth and governance, similarly to his interpretation of power, also changed over the course of his lifetime. Foucault's early work speaks of 'regimes of truth' which implies a level of difficulty in challenging a status quo ultimately constructed to deliberately keep its subjects in order. In this respect regimes of truth might in reality be lies designed to regulate society in a certain way. It therefore follows that whether government documents regarding writing in the early years are incorrect or not is unimportant – they are examples of regimes of truth with the power to establish what can be thought (and not thought) about early years writing. Later changes in Foucault's thinking however led to a new term, that of 'games of truth'. Here, despite a discourse being the norm, there was potentially room for manoeuvre where individuals might find ways to manage themselves creatively within an established framework, for example a statutory curriculum. Peters (2004, p.57) goes further arguing that "the emphasis falls on how the human subject constitutes itself by strategically entering into such games and playing them to best advantage". The current research was conducted within a setting which statutorily followed the EYFS (DfE, 2014). How to understand and interpret the writing curriculum in the light of discovered discourse of writing was part of the research process. It has been argued that discovery of the truth behind any discourse is crucial. If the status quo is to be challenged, it invariably involves concepts of who holds the power, but with it there is, through new understanding, the potential for empowerment. The research was designed to potentially challenge the status quo with regard to early writing where the truth about such discourse might be different from what the writing curriculum stated children should know, what they should be doing, and what their writing should look like. An example of this might involve an adult attributing the term 'mark making' to children's graphic communication, thus taking power away from them if they genuinely feel empowered through a belief that they are actually writing.

Two key questions of relevance emanate from the above lines of argument: first, what is the culture behind the thinking and interpretation that perpetuates writing practice? Second, who holds the power within such a system of practice? Ball (1994, p.21) for example further defines discourse, in the context of policy analysis, as "what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, where, when and with what authority", suggesting the power of the creation of policy by government with regard to regulation and compliance amongst the population. In relation to the early years writing curriculum such power thwarts challenge. The curriculum is statutory; its contents must be followed, it has become the expected norm. It supports a certain narrative, incorporating definitive conceptualisations about children and writing. Neither are statutory early years writing curricula designed to be challenged because children's progress and outcomes against a writing early learning goal must be recorded and presented to a public (government) audience. Whilst Ball's (1994) definition encompasses notions of power relations it does however offer the possibility of fluidity within such a construct, but it would make sense to suggest that this is perhaps only achievable once the truth behind a discourse is known. This is a curriculum that has been created by adults; it is therefore imperative to understand

what it is that children from the age of two years' old might know themselves about writing, to allow them to speak.

In terms of further exploring Ball's (1994) notion of who holds the power in relation to policy, Foucault's work engages with middle-class or bourgeois perspectives of what is valuable in terms of educational aspiration through the use of the phrase "political economy" (2002, p.204). He tells us that the political economy "serves the interests of the bourgeois class ... it was made by and for that class" (*op cit.*). Marsh (2003) argues that pioneers of early years education such as Froebel and Montessori developed theoretical frameworks in which 'underprivileged' children were to be 'saved' from their oppressive circumstances by a curriculum which gave them access to the arts, literature and nature. This perspective is reflective of a deficit model which has persisted well into the 21st century. Looking at literacy in particular, the deficit model exists, despite research which has shown that children are exposed to a rich variety of literacy experiences in their homes (for example Heath, 1983; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Indeed, whilst researchers such as Marsh (2003) have argued that for many years the focus in early years education has been on the inclusion of literacy practices which are entrenched within the socio cultural lives of middle-class groups, such as storybook reading and writing as individual practice, longitudinal studies such as the EPPSE Project (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj, 2015) have also shown how such provision can support *all* children's literacy development, regardless of class and particularly benefitting children from working class families. This has led to changes in how two-year-olds are perceived in that early intervention in the form of access to free, high quality early years provision will enable them to catch up with their more adept, middle-class peers. From a Foucaultian perspective, the government, the representatives and regulators of the bourgeois class, have produced an intervention discourse for such 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds.

There is a rationale of responsive logic embedded within a discourse of intervention; for example, that it has the capacity to impact on long-term literacy outcomes (Sylva et al., 2010). On one level the Early Years Foundation Stage in England (DfE, 2014) is a curriculum that ensures a focus on child development. On another level however it is an example of a "controlled" discourse (Foucault, 1970, p.52) developed as a means of regulating and maintaining power relations within society, or as Ball describes it, "the management of populations" (2013, p.6). To this end it could be argued that those families being offered free places at early years settings simply have no power. They take up their nursery place and are thereby inculcated into the middle-class education system from that point, to some extent handing over responsibility for their child to a higher order. This therefore produces a 'norm' and hence some children are above and below that norm; they are 'othered' and excluded. Additionally, the EYFS (DfE, 2014) with its early assessment procedures produces particular identities and subjects. It produces a writing identity of a subject as only being able to write if they can achieve certain expectations beyond mere 'mark making'. However, in line with Ball's definition of discourse, Foucault also explained truth as "a constantly moving set of articulations, shifts, and coincidences that are established, only to give rise to others" (2002, p.211). He spoke of the "will to truth" (1970, p.52) where discourse is "the power which is to be seized" (1970, p.53). At the same time, Foucault's notion of truth involved the need for discovery

as he argued that knowledge and truth therein are based on a set of fundamental assumptions so basic to any discourse that they are often invisible to people operating within it. In this respect the potential for change within the current study to better support children's writing experiences was only possible if the truth behind their discourse of writing was discovered and exposed through joint discovery with the potential for all stakeholders involved to become empowered through newly created understandings of children writing. This by default could involve a power shift through the creation of a new discourse of writing within the early years setting; new truth which the setting, the parents and their children would ultimately have ownership of. As Foucault reminds us this is entirely possible because "discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1976, p.100-1).

In summary the nature of the research project was investigative, seeking to 'speak to' the truth surrounding discourse of writing that were waiting to be revealed. Discovering the children's discourse of writing had the potential to enable several transformational shifts in power relations. For the children themselves, uncovering of their personal discourse of writing would mean that it could become known by the adults involved in their lives. This in itself would demand a response with new understanding leaving adults feeling able to support the children appropriately through changes to existing writing pedagogy. New writing pedagogy would directly respond to the true discourse of writing, as opposed to one that might have been previously assumed, misunderstood, or even unknown. New understanding could additionally lead to greater communication between parents and practitioners, both working together on the children's behalf. Most exciting however was the possibility of a new, co-constructed writing curriculum developed by the children, their parents and their practitioners. Whilst such a curriculum might challenge the established statutory curriculum, the underlying precept would be how best to support children as developing writers from the age of two.

2.4 The Complexities of Learning to Write

2.4.1 Writing as a Competence

Central to children's development is their achievement in several competences, a process which begins from birth (Pomerantz, Grolnick and Price (2005). Pomerantz et al. (2005) include writing as one such competence; and indeed within the literature based on children's early writing one author, Martello (2001, 2004), has used the term 'pre-competence' to describe an early stage of a child's trajectory into conventional writing. It takes time to become competent in any skill and the notion of writing as a competence to be achieved over a period of time supports the developmental approach that this research project built on. Writing in itself is not an easy task and it needs practice (Clay 1975; 1993). It requires children to execute certain skills in order to be successful. For example, even for what might appear the simplest of writing tasks such as name writing, it requires the coordination of children's motor skills (handwriting) and letter knowledge (orthography) (Gerde, Skibbe, Bowlse and Martoccio, 2012). Understanding grows increasingly over time

involving ever refining cognitive skills (Ferreiro, 1986). Rowe (2003) found that an analysis of what she termed unconventional texts suggested that young children's authoring processes are however no different from those used by older writers. Studies such as those by Harste et al (1984) and Wray (1994) have also made a case for adults and children alike undergoing similar cognitive processes in terms of the decisions they make when confronted with a writing task. Writing involves choosing from a range of possible actions, which in turn implies a degree of conscious awareness of potential alternatives. Pahl (1999) argues that when creating meaning, strategies that adults and children use that are the same are: 1. consideration of the semantics of the message (how to say what one means); 2. consideration of the pragmatics of the piece (what the rules of language are relative to the genre); 3. consideration given to the syntax or flow of the message in that what appears on the page must bear a relationship to a spoken message and with the knowledge in mind that what is written down is to be read; 4. Consideration of the graphics of the message such as correct letter formation, or uniformity of letter size and shape; and 5. consideration of organisational skills such as when writing in English using left-to-right orientation. Children and adults draw on these systems simultaneously as they communicate via written language; children as they develop their awareness of the functions and forms of writing, and adults for whom writing systems are much further developed and practiced.

Psychologically oriented studies have researched the potential impact of adult support or behaviour that fosters positive learning dispositions in children through the two diametrically opposed terms of *learned helplessness* and *mastery orientation* (Elliot and Dweck, 2007). It is an interesting line of enquiry to pursue in considering children's writing development. Schunk and Pajares (2005, p.85) describe individuals' perceptions of themselves and their capabilities as "vital forces in their success or failure in achievement" and argue that perceptions of competence are crucial in this respect. There is a current line of thinking that supports the notion of mastery in the 21st century learner within the context of a curriculum that enables the use of ever-sophisticated problem-solving strategies. Gallagher and Wyse (2012, p.43) argue for example that a primary aim of any curriculum is to engender passion for learning, coupled with encouraging choices over learning. Pomerantz, Grolnick and Price (2005) describe such interactions as practices; they argue that parents' practices include various levels or types of involvement with their child. Involvement might take the form of the provision of important resources, such as books, and time (reading the books with their children). It might also include the nature of conversations, and verbal and non-verbal responses to children's acts (Makin, 2006). In this way parental involvement has the potential to enhance how children approach achievement in three ways: first, assisting children in building skills that facilitate feelings of competence; second, establishing a sense of relatedness between parents and children (because investing time together in this way indicates that parents are interested in their child, thus creating a closeness with them); and third, supporting children in perceiving that what they are doing is purposeful because parental responses communicate to them that they are engaged in valuable activities. This is important research because early literacy development is currently a global concern and it is now established that children's early experiences have the potential to influence later educational outcomes. Researchers into children's learning dispositions for example assert the importance for life-long

learning of developing positive dispositions towards learning during the pre-school years (Roberts, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), where self-esteem, interest, involvement, confidence and playfulness are identified as key dispositions. Makin (2006, p.275) argues that in order to support positive dispositions about literacy, children need to be encouraged to take an active role in such experiences “from the beginning, so they become familiar with the social construction of knowledge.” Focusing on the quality and impact of early writing experiences that might be experienced and/or offered in children’s home and pre-school settings is therefore a worthwhile and relevant line of enquiry to pursue.

The research reported in this dissertation incorporated children’s, parents’, and practitioners’ perceptions about early writing. Adult perceptions are important because involvement in a child’s life includes supporting them in their endeavours (Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994). A hypothesis of the research was that adult perceptions may for example impact on how early writing practice might (or might not) be supported both at home and in the pre-school setting. For example, Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004), investigating the relationship between home variables and writing development in pre-school children, described predictors of writing competence amongst children aged between four and seven years old. It would seem worthwhile therefore to explore the value of understanding what it is that parents of even younger children can do to positively support early writing experiences to support optimum outcomes. Another hypothesis of this research was that if the children’s discourse of writing was understood, effective pedagogical approaches could be established, but also that adult approaches to supporting writing needed to be understood. Children’s perceptions of themselves as writers and their motivation in relation to writing are important factors in production of text. How they are supported or viewed as writers may therefore have an impact on their perceptions. Compton-Lilly (2006, p.57) argues “the ways we see ourselves are filtered through the relationships we share with others, the knowledge and experiences we bring, and the contexts within which we live and learn.” This line of thinking, which builds on the premise that children’s experiences and adult responses are intrinsic to understanding and individual identity, suggests that “a key question is how to enable children to approach such issues [as writing] positively so that they are successful in navigating the challenges they face over the course of development” Pomerantz et al. (2005, p.259). How children’s early efforts to write are responded to by others such as key adults in their lives may therefore have the potential to impact on how they develop writing as a competence. This incorporates children’s perceptions of writing; its usefulness for example, as well as how difficult or challenging they may find it, but also how others perceive their writing. Bradford and Wyse’s (2013) study² of three-and-four-year-old children’s perceptions of themselves as writers examined links between parental perceptions and children’s perceptions of themselves as writers. Three possible overarching patterns of belief and effect emerged across the six participant families involved, where only one of the six children were writing in any conventional sense of the word. This child’s parents perceived her to be a writer; the child also perceived herself to be a writer. There were additionally four parents who perceived their children not to be writers but who nevertheless went along with the children’s beliefs that they were writing, acknowledging their efforts on paper.

² This paper extends Bradford’s Masters research from 2008.

The children of this group of parents also perceived themselves to be writers. Finally, one set of parents perceived their child not to be a writer. Here, the child also perceived himself not to be a writer. The impact of this was that he was therefore not engaging with an emergent phase at all due to a black and white perception of writing as conventional text. One study investigating the perspectives of mothers of pre-school children on their children as writers raised questions with regard to how to bridge a perceived gap on the part of the parents between writing at home and pre-school setting practice (Roderick, 1990). Neumann and Neumann (2009, p.259) argue that it is “critically important” for parents to be aware of how they can support their children in informal literacy-based activities at home to include joint writing experiences as well as reading. If studies such as these show the potential impact of parental perceptions on children’s perceptions, then it can be argued that the ways in which adults respond to children as developing writers is pivotal to their success as writers. Similarly, early years practitioners may not understand how to support the development of writing for a child between the ages of birth and three years’ old. The focus in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) on the three prime areas of learning may in fact preclude early years practitioners from focusing on other areas of the curriculum. Why consider writing when a child needs to develop their language and communication skills? These are not necessarily deficit approaches but rather lack of adult understanding in relation to writing where the term ‘writing’ is itself linked for many adults with notions of conventional script (Bradford and Wyse, 2013). It might seem incredulous from the perspective of a parent of a two- or three-year-old child to therefore be asked, “Do you and your child ever write together at home?”

2.4.2 The Development of Writing from the Age of Two

An early focus for my research was whether any evidence from the literature base could be found to establish that two-year-old children are of an age where they are beginning to actively engage with writing discourse. I have shown so far in this literature review how engagement in writing by children is likely to be dependent upon how writing is understood and conceptualised, particularly by the adults involved in children’s lives, but also in policy. In the EYFS (DfE, 2014), children are not necessarily expected to hold a writing implement correctly until they are five years’ old; this is based on their ability to develop a comfortable pencil grip vis-à-vis the expectation that only then will they be able to produce “identifiable letters” (2012, p.31). This approach supports a fundamental conceptualisation of writing as conventional text. From an academic perspective, Wells Rowe (2008, p.388) argued that “at aged two, many children are too limited in their oral language to independently verbalise their intentions or are too inexperienced in literacy events to form connections between graphic activity and linguistic messages”. Additionally, Topping, Dekhinet and Zeedyk (2013, p.391) write that “children in most environments learn to talk by the age of three. Then, in the first three years of school, they start learning to read and write”. This arguably delineative and somewhat narrow approach excludes however the impact of any form of writing development preceding pre-school and school attendance, further evidence for which is now presented in line with the developmental approach to writing underpinning perspectives presented within this literature review.

A significant range of research exists of studies from different cultures that has consistently explored how children's developing writing is initially based on drawing (see Levin and Bus, 2003; Yang and Noel, 2006; Yamagata, 2007; Lancaster, 2007). Studies such as these put forward an argument that even if children do not know how to produce drawing and writing conventionally, they are able to produce recognisable features of their native script on the basis of the formal-perceptual features of each system and are able to distinguish between systems. In this respect, Levin and Bus (2003, p.891) have argued that when writing-like forms develop, it is more appropriate to say that the child writes by *drawing* the two-dimensional object known as print. However, as they explore the features of writing, the discovery that some features are distinctive helps children to organise their written materials, for example moving from a discontinuous linear pattern to a small number of distinguishable elements; they suggest that it is in this respect that it can be argued that the graphic patterns of writing are being reproduced. Levin and Bus (2003) have further argued that writing becomes symbolic when the child becomes aware that it is a notational system composed of letters; however, whilst children at this point in their writing development might have learnt some of the global characteristics of writing such as linearity, horizontal orientation, variety of elements, and multiple units, their knowledge of the pattern of features of each letter is likely to still be incomplete. Writing at this stage is therefore distinguishable from early drawing in terms of properties such as linearity and segmentation into units to represent individual words.

Other studies can be found which outline trajectories of differentiation between drawing and writing from the age of two years and below. For example, Yamagata (2007) investigated the process by which representational activity and knowledge about letter writing emerges in Japanese children aged between 21 and 46 months, suggesting that drawing and writing emerge from a common core of indistinguishable products. The main findings of the study showed the following: 1. the recognition of representational systems increases with age; 2. representational activities correspondingly develop with age through several phases; and 3. that whilst children over three can recognise each system correctly, this is not necessarily related to representational activity. An example of representational activity in relation to writing might be the child's signature written in the top left-hand corner of the paper. At this stage the meaning of what is written is perhaps determined by the place where it appears, or by the child's intention as a writer, rather than by any recognisable conventional features, a view supported by Tolchinsky (2006). Yang and Noel (2006) argue that by the age of four years, writing has been internally grasped by the child as a particular activity that produces a specific formal output distinct from drawing, in that it is linear and discrete; Lancaster (2003, 2007) has significantly found however that children under the age of two are able to distinguish between writing, drawing, and number. This is based on the child's experience and perceptions of how each of these three domains individually represents meaning, because, as Yamagata (2007) has argued, children under the age of two will still lack the fine motor skill and control to write in the conventional sense of the word. At the same time, Yamagata's study and other research such as that of Lancaster's suggests that some two-year-olds have begun to display the characteristic of intentionality in their written communications.

Whilst studies that deal specifically with early writing and use of notation amongst children below the age of three years are difficult to find, there are many studies to be found that report on notating skills in slightly older pre-school children (see Leyva, Reese and Wiser, 2011 for example). Notation involves a child's ability to *systematically* produce, read, and use their writing vis-à-vis their understanding of the functions of print. Goodman (1986, p.142) further argues that its use enables "authoritative identification of work from performance to performance", highlighting notation as purposeful, significant, and permanent. This is somewhat different from experimenting with writing as a deliberate and planned means of communication, for which there is a little more evidence. Tolchinsky (2003) describes how it was first in the field of psychology that writing came to be perceived as "a kind of knowledge that undergoes reorganizational processes with age and experience" (2003, p.53). Tolchinsky (2003) further argues that the study of children's developing writing involves two aspects; their ability to use it to communicate effectively and their knowledge of writing as a domain, claiming that "writing is an efficient means of transmitting messages, but it is also a domain of inquiry" (p.54). This line of thinking aligns with arguments already made in this literature review which combine cognitive aspects and deliberate attempts to communicate meaningfully despite children not yet writing conventionally. A second study into writing and use of notation before the age of three years was undertaken by Lancaster and Roberts (2006). This study involved 10 children between the ages of 18 and 36 months old and their families. Findings showed clearly how the children were variously differentiating between drawing and other ways of representing meaning through what Lancaster and Roberts (2006) described as graphic signs. There was also evidence to suggest that some of the children were aware of an association between spoken language and writing, for example understanding protocol when writing birthday cards. The study also significantly found that it was misleading for adults to view unconventional text (described as mark making by the authors) produced by children of this age as drawing. Lancaster and Roberts (2006, p.9) argued that the children's productions were "graphic signs in their own right rather than undeveloped forms of drawing or writing". Adults, they argued, sometimes mistakenly described writing as drawing due to its unconventional nature, however Tolchinsky (2003, p.16) argues that by default writing and numbers must differ from drawing because they are based on notation, whereas drawing is not.

Other literature can be found to support the fact that very young children are engaging in a discourse of early writing. There are case studies of individual children for example undertaken by parent researchers in the United Kingdom and the United States of America such as Bissex (1980), Baghban (1984), and Payton (1984). Each includes longitudinal descriptions of the developing writing of children between one and two years old and gives gravitas to a knowledge base due to similarities between each child's developmental trajectories. Writing development can be tracked in clear phases in such studies. Baghban (1984) for example documented how her daughter initially understood that she could create marks (Baghban's terminology) on paper from the age of eighteen months, spending time closely observing the marks she made, fascinated in their creation and pattern. This moved into a subsequent phase of controlling and intentionally repeating certain kinds of marks. Next, at just before the age of two, she began to respond with the names of objects when asked what she had written. This was followed by a phase of expressing her intention to write certain

letters before she did so. Finally, by the age of two years and nine months, she wrote marks that she read as her name, locating her at an age and stage of writing development well documented in the research base of children from the age of three years old. More recently, Wells Rowe (2008a, 2008b) has investigated shared understandings about text and intentionality in two-year-old children. Wells Rowe (2008a, p.66) used the term ‘social contracts’ in relation to the writing that the children engaged in, defining it as encompassing a way to “[draw] attention to the ways children’s knowledge about writing is socially negotiated, collectively constructed, and linked to local writing practices”. In other words, the expectation was that children would write about what they knew using the understanding about writing that they had. Wells Rowe’s (2008a) study describes what one group of 18 two-year-old children learned in their classroom over the course of nine months about writing. The findings showed how the children co constructed texts with adults. The study also showed how from a two-year-old’s perspective, their graphic representations could stand for words and sentences, thus conveying a clear message in what was written down. A second paper (Wells Rowe, 2008b) documenting the same research study further outlined the nature of intentionality as a characteristic of the children’s writing actions. A limitation of the research however, as Wells Rowe herself points out, was that “children learned intentionality in learning-to-write events that were designed and structured, to a large extent, by adults” (2008b, p.425). The question that needs to be answered therefore is whether intentionality is a true characteristic of a two-year-old’s intrinsic writing repertoire.

A study undertaken by Wells Rowe and Neitzel (2010) looked at interest and agency in writing amongst children aged between two and three years old, using their personal interests as a starting point for writing activities. The authors concluded that such personal interests resulted in different profiles of the participant children’s early writing experiences. This outcome makes sense in the context of consistent research showing how children’s differing participation in literacy events at home and in their communities impacts on and shapes individual text production (Purcell-Gates, 1986; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Compton-Lilly, 2006). Wells Rowe and Neitzel’s (2010) overall discovery however was that children as young as two and three were shaping writing events according to their own personal interests displayed in the context of their early years setting, thus demonstrating a sense of agency in their approach. The authors described four preferred types of writing activity amongst the participant children which they mapped to “personal interest orientations” (Wells Rowe and Neitzel, 2010, p.169). These were first, children with conceptual interests who used writing to explore and record ideas on topics of personal interest, for example using compositional skills to create texts of an identifiable genre. Second, there were children with procedural interests who explored how writing worked and practiced conventional literacy, for example using a letter or combination of letters that could be reproduced accurately to create a range of texts. Third, children with creative interests were using writing to generate new literacy processes and new uses for materials, for example engaging in exploratory play with writing materials such as felt tip pens on paper to observe their effect. The final category incorporated children with socially oriented interests who used writing to join in socially with their friends or adults, aligning their activity choices with those of others already engaged in writing activity. These personal interest orientations are helpful when considering children’s motivation to write and that writing needs to have a purpose. They also highlighted

writing as a developmental process and recognised the importance of understanding children's personal trajectories in order to be able to respond appropriately from an effective pedagogical perspective as they engage with a discourse of early writing.

Studies have also investigated language proficiency and whether or how this might impact on a young child's engagement with a discourse of early writing. Britton (1970) for example, suggested that a working knowledge of the structure and function of talk serves as the basis for reading and writing growth in older children, however Dyson (1983) looked at the role of oral language in the early writing achievements of children in their first year of schooling. Dyson (1983, p.3) stated that "to write *conventionally* children must be able, not just to talk, but to conceptualise words which will represent their thoughts" (emphasis added). Embedded within the structure of the EYFS (DfE, 2014) is a focus on early childhood development during the first three years of life, including the prime area of communication and language. Literacy on the other hand is termed as a specific area of learning. The rationale behind such a structure is that the prime areas are central to development in all areas of learning and are time sensitive, for example the development of language skills happens in a particular window of brain development (Kuhl, 2004, Goswami, 2011); whereas the acquisition of literacy skills (reading and writing) can occur within a broader timescale. To this end, prime areas are particularly relevant between the ages of 0-3 and are not dependent on the specific areas of learning; rather the specific areas of learning provide contexts for building on early development in the prime areas. Conversely, specific areas are dependent on learning in the prime areas in that the specific learning cannot easily take place without the prime areas. In relation to writing development, this rationale makes sense within the context of what research tells us about the causal role that children's early language and literacy experiences play in their long-term literacy outcomes (Wells, 1986; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). At the same time, Longobardi, Rossi-Arnaud and Spataro (2011, p.572) argue that a number of studies have reported that infants show extensive written communicative abilities before the age of two years, even before the emergence of conventional words.

Despite an emerging trend in the last decade of increased study of the writing forms and processes of children between birth and three years, what is still a very limited literature base reveals that compelling evidence in relation to this particular age group is still missing, and relatively little is known about two-year-old children and their interactions or engagement with writing (Rowe, 2008; Rowe and Neitzel, 2010; Lancaster, 2012); however it has been shown in this section of the literature review that there is some evidence to confirm that writing development is already occurring for children under the age of three years. The most recent systematic literature review examining the effects of preschool writing instruction on emergent literacy skills was undertaken by Hall, Simpson, Guo, and Wang (2015). Whilst their review adds weight to the need for developing a more effective writing pedagogy for preschool children, one of the criteria for selection within the review was studies involving children aged between 3 to 5 years' old. The authors do however acknowledge Rowe and Neitzel's (2010) paper discussing how children as young as two years have been observed using early writing to explore and record ideas (Hall et al., 2015, p.116). During the course of reviewing available empirical studies I found only seven studies in total which included the word 'writing' in the title, thus directly exploring what is happening for this age group. Another set of relevant studies which

did focus on writing have used varying terms such as ‘representational systems’ (Yamagata, 2007) and ‘graphic signs’ (Lancaster, 2007), or ‘emergent literacy skills’ (Neumann, Hood and Neumann, 2009); language to describe writing is not consistent amongst academics or research studies. A third set of studies used ‘literacy’ in the title, but scrutinising these confirmed that the majority of research into early literacy skills focus on development through an exploration of reading. Makin (2006) looked at literacy development through the act of shared book reading between babies aged 8-12 months old for example, and Davidse, de Jong, Bus, Huijbregts and Swaab (2010) looked at the cognitive and environmental predictors of early literacy skills, but also through an examination of book exposure. To become literate includes the development of both reading and writing skills however. There is some evidence to suggest that the home environment can provide many opportunities to develop children’s writing skills (see also Neumann, Hood and Neumann, 2009), however research also shows that when compared with parental storybook reading, far fewer parents engage pre-school children in interactions focusing on writing (Wood, 2002). This is despite earlier research such as that of Payton (1984) whose longitudinal case study of her daughter’s reading and writing development concluded that familiarity with texts, parents (and grandparents) who acted as role models, and access to writing materials were three crucial factors in her daughter’s journey to becoming an independent reader and writer. Findings from research suggest that reading with pre-school children results in a greater impact on comprehension skills through parents commenting much more frequently on the content of the story rather than print concepts (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh, 2004). Raising parental awareness of both the value of supporting writing in the home and ways in which they can do this may therefore be an issue. In contrast to the number of studies that focus on the frequency of book reading in the home literacy environment, Robins, Treiman and Rosales (2009) additionally argue that activities in the home that do focus on writing and letters themselves may in fact be more accurate predictors of children’s early literacy skills than those that focus on storybook reading because pre-school children spend more time looking at the pictures than at the print in books. They suggest that studies may have overlooked some of the everyday interactions that provide children with information about writing. Levy (2011) makes the same claim, suggesting that literacy activities which focus on print where children are encouraged to actively participate are better related, through language interactions, to the development of orthographic knowledge, shaping a child’s understanding of how words look.

Language ability from a young age cannot be underestimated in that children show extensive communicative abilities, even before the onset of the second year of life and before the utterance of conventional words (Camaioni, 2001). Young children can understand far more than they can articulate as they become competent language users. Makin (2006) for example looked at language interactions during shared book reading between 10 babies aged 8-12 months, and their mothers. The babies in Makin’s study were defined as being in the ‘prelinguistic stage’, communicating through paralinguistic gestures such as vocalisations, body language and gestures, and facial expressions. Makin (2006) also found that mothers used literacy-related terms such as ‘book’ and ‘page’ with their babies who were typically encouraged to help with page turning; some mothers would talk about ‘the last page’ or ‘the end’. Oral feedback such as this acknowledges children’s efforts at communicating and encourages

continued practice, including filling in many details about the how language is structured. Robins, Treiman and Rosales' (2009) study looked at whether and how parents talk about writing with their children, analysing exchanges between children aged 18 months to 5 years old. Drawing on parent-child conversations transcribed in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney, 2000), findings provided evidence to show that children do receive information about the symbolic nature of writing through informal conversations with their parents; before formal instruction in reading and writing begins, and before they produce anything resembling conventional writing. They looked at whether parents spoke about writing differently from drawing for example through examining syntactic and semantic ways in which they spoke about each as two distinct systems. Robins, Treiman and Rosales (2009) found that parents' clear differentiation between 'write' and 'draw' with children aged between 2 and 3 years of age was in fact notable. They argue that this was a significant finding when children "at the younger end of the studied age range [produced] unrecognisable scribbles" (p.476). Significantly they also found that whilst parents were strict in their talk about writing, never suggesting that writing could be the same as drawing, they did speak about drawing "with some looseness" (p.475), occasionally saying something like, "Draw your name". Robins, Treiman and Rosales (2009) suggest this may provide less straightforward information about the nature of print for children. It could however also be explained in terms of parent perceptions of writing (Bradford and Wyse, 2013).

Social interaction with another human being is important in relation to the developmental process of language (Vygotsky, 1978; Kuhl, 2004) and further research can be found to support the narrative of parents *scaffolding* understanding of writing through the language they use. For younger children at home, Aram (2007, 2010) suggests that parent interventions throughout the day such as identifying printed words or talking with a child as they attempt to write words at home may foster children's understanding of the nature and functions of writing. This could happen even when writing is not the focus of attention, for example a parent saying to a child that they will be able to go shopping as soon as they have finished writing a shopping list. Here, the parent is not teaching their child to write, nor are they intervening in a child's own attempts to write. However, they are conveying the idea that writing serves a definite purpose. Leyva, Reese and Wiser (2012) also highlight the fact that parents and children engage in conversations around letters and numbers at home. Their study with pre-school children aged between 43 to 63 months looked at how parents' communication played a role in the development of their children's notating skills. Part of the study involved recording the children writing a grocery list, supported by a parent where the amount of parents' talk about the purpose of writing was assessed. Findings showed that children who were better at writing the list had parents who provided more 'high-quality' assistance as they did so, for example allowing or encouraging children to find ways to encode information they wanted to include. Development of writing skills is therefore influenced by verbal interactions with adults that support a child's understandings of the power of writing; what it represents. In this way developing a meta language to support children's emerging understanding of the uses and formats of writing can be developed. In summary, language ability, as studies of this age group have shown, does not therefore preclude them from engaging with a discourse of early writing.

2.4.3 Writing in the Home Environment

Research with families where children are brought up by their parents as their main carers shows that the parents are the main mediators of children's learning in early childhood (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin and Fuligni, 2000). To this end the home provides the earliest learning environment for writing. Studies provide evidence for the contribution of the home literacy environment on children's emerging literacy skills (for example Weigel, Martin and Bennett, 2006). Teale and Sulzby (1986) argue that the contribution of the home environment involves three broad categories in relation to writing experience: those episodes in which adults interact with children in writing situations; those episodes in which children explore print on their own; and those episodes in which children observe adults modelling writing behaviours. These are rather loose terms with which to frame an argument as some of the literature has been undertaken from a deficit perspective where parents have been perceived as deficient (often because of their socioeconomic status) rather than as resourceful and competent (Nichols, Nixon, Pudney and Juvansuu, 2009). Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that parents' personal goals for their children are influenced by their perceptions of their child's specific needs and their own values, which has been found to shape their resource-seeking practices (Nichols et al., 2009). Whilst many studies such as that of Teale and Sulzby (1986) have focused on the social-class dimension of family literacy practices as a major influence on young children's literacy development, both qualitative and quantitative work suggests that it is the quality and frequency of literacy-related actions and interactions that children experience at home (Sylva et al., 2010). All parents have the potential to provide their children with experience of a rich variety of home and community literacy activities and patterns of relationship can be established between home literacy practices and children's emergent literacy knowledge. Children's understanding of the intentionality of print is related to both the frequency of literacy events in the home and to their personal involvement in these, for example being read a story, or writing a birthday card. Children might be expected to know more about the alphabetic code and the specific forms of written language in homes where members read and write for their own entertainment and leisure (Dunsmuir and Blatchford, 2004).

Two approaches in relation to the potential role parents play in supporting their children's literacy development, beyond that of introducing language for communication of concepts about reading and writing can be drawn from the literature. The first investigates the relationship between parents' cognitive skills and children's cognitive outcomes (for example Davidse, de Jong, Bus, Huijbregts and Swaab, (2010); de Coulon, Meschi and Vignoles (2011)); and the second looks at socioeconomic status in relation to educational disadvantage and how this might be overcome, for example through participation in family literacy projects (see Jordan, Snow and Porche, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004; McTavish, 2007; Sidle, Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2013). Whilst these studies do not necessarily focus on impact on writing development itself as a core focus of the research, literacy does incorporate writing and some tentative suggestions of relevance to the overall arguments in relation to hypotheses presented in relation to the current research can therefore be posited. Davidse et al (2010) looked at the relationship between book exposure, cognitive control, and early literacy skills in a group of 228 four-year-old native

Dutch-speaking children. They highlighted a child's home literacy environment as a potential mitigating factor in the development of literacy skills, the effectiveness of which was interpreted in terms of the perceived importance and value of books and shared book reading in the home. Cognitive control and its impact on literacy development was looked at and measured in terms of a child's willingness to remain engaged with a book and their short-term memory skills in relation to their ability to hold information in the mind. Davidse et al's (2010) findings were in line with their hypothesis that exposure to books is an important step in becoming literate, but the authors found no evidence for their hypothesis that effects of book exposure depend on child characteristics such as cognitive control skills. This can be explained by additional research such as that of de Coulon et al (2011) who highlighted the fact that whilst it is generally perceived that there is a positive relationship between a parent's childhood cognitive skill level and their own child's skill level, skills levels do have the potential to change during childhood, for example as a result of positive and engaging experience. Thus if a child enters an early years setting at the age of two years having come from a less than optimum home literacy environment, exposure to literacy experiences in the setting may have a positive impact on their cognitive skills level. It is this line of thinking that has led to the development of family literacy projects and an increasing focus on intervention in early years settings and which provides the underpinning for an ongoing discourse based on overcoming 'educational disadvantage'. McTavish (2007, p.476) raises the issue of the many kinds of written language and print-embedded activities that occur [at home] for young children and how these are often assumed as occurring exclusively in middle-class homes. Bloodgood (1999) has similarly conducted research challenging the assumptions ascribed to socioeconomic status and home literacy experience. In England, Wells (1986) investigated causal connections between socioeconomic status, language experience in the pre-school years and educational achievement. The starting point for studies such as these is what is actually happening in terms of literacy experiences for the children from such families rather than what might be missing. McTavish (2007, p.483)'s case study of one working class family in Canada supporting their daughter's pathways to literacy found for example that she was given "multiple opportunities" to enter into literacy. All three researchers concluded that socioeconomic status does not necessarily determine a child's ability to develop as a reader or writer and that great variation exists.

The EPPE Project (Sylva, Melhush, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2010) did however look at the home literacy environment in terms of seven types of home learning activities for pre-school children. Two of these related to the development of writing. These were the frequency with which a child painted or drew at home and the frequency with which a parent taught letters and numbers. The children involved in their study were aged three years and above, which could account for why teaching letters and numbers was felt appropriate to include as a mitigating activity for assessment. Implications for this research from studies relating to disadvantage centre however on the profile of writing in the home; its place and value and how involved a child might be in writing events from a young age. It is important for experience to be age-appropriate and therefore understanding how writing might manifest itself for a two-year-old child is needed in order to effectively observe and shape development. Nichols, Nixon, Pudney and Jurvansuu (2009, p.147) argued that "parents deal with a complex web of choices when seeking and using knowledge and

resources related to their young children's literacy development". They state that parents' understanding of how best to foster learning and development to optimise children's learning is particularly important in relation the pre-school period. Increasingly the government in England has introduced a narrative of parents as co-educators, for example in the EYFS (DfE, 2014, p.30), it states that early years settings must make information available to parents on "how the EYFS is being delivered in the setting, and how parents and/or carers can access more information" and on "the range and type of activities and experiences provided for children, the daily routines of the setting, and how parents and carers can share learning at home". To this end McTavish (2007, p.484) argues that "given the complexity and individuality of families, we need to be mindful that the home, school, and community can serve as co constructors of all children's literacy knowledge".

2.4.4 Effective Writing Pedagogy

If children as young as two years old are indeed beginning to write, it follows that understanding effective writing pedagogy is key to supporting learning. Few studies can be found that focus solely on pre-school writing pedagogy (see Hall, Simpson, Guo and Wang, 2015). Two concomitant studies in England (Miller and Paige Smith, 2004) and New Zealand (Foote, Smith and Ellis, 2004) highlight the challenges of understanding writing from a young age through their exploration of the impact of practitioner beliefs on pre-school children's literacy experiences. Miller and Paige Smith (2004) discovered a range of approaches to supporting early literacy across four early years settings in England all delivering the same curriculum. What was consistent was that whilst the settings were all well-resourced to support reading and writing experiences, there was confusion amongst practitioners regarding their role amidst an underpinning belief that children required formal adult led teaching in order to meet literacy outcomes (p.132). This was firmly juxtaposed against a curriculum that espoused (and still to this day espouses) a play-based approach to learning. Foote, Smith and Ellis's (2004) study discovered a similar finding with regard to what might be considered appropriate literacy practice with children of this age, concluding that "teachers' pedagogical practices have the potential to limit or expand children's literacy experiences" (p.144). It follows therefore that practitioners would be more likely to facilitate appropriate writing experiences for children if they understood how writing develops, how they could effectively support such writing development, and how to provide challenging experiences for children which included taking into account the contexts of their experiences of writing at home (see Makin and Groom, 2002). Listening to children and hearing what they have to say in relation to their understanding of writing and how they are using it is therefore also crucial. This conceptualisation of writing suggests three important elements in becoming a competent or skilled writer whatever stage of writing development the child has reached: first, developing the cognitive or strategic processes involved in planning, drafting, evaluating and revising text; second, attaining a sense of competence and positive disposition towards writing; and third, acquiring relevant knowledge about different aspects and types of writing, including awareness of the audience.

Locating research that specifically outlined effective writing pedagogy with children below the age of three years proved challenging (see Gerde, Bingham, and

Pendergast, 2015); indeed, the most recent review of pre-school writing and emergent literacy skills by Hall, Simpson, Guo and Wang (2015) argues that little information exists regarding effective writing instruction in the pre-school setting even for children aged between three and five years. My own searches found that studies that explored early writing across the younger age group tended not to draw conclusions in relation to implications for writing pedagogy; instead they highlighted the ways in which children of this age are already engaging with an early discourse of writing. A range of studies look at the importance of the knowledge and experience that children bring to a writing event for example and acknowledge the importance of the contexts within which children live and learn (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Lancaster, 2007; Wells Rowe, 2008; Wells Rowe and Neitzel, 2010). A 'meta language' of writing terminology was often used in such studies, for example 'intentionality' (Wells Rowe, 2008), and 'agency' (Wells Rowe and Neitzel, 2010). Neuman and Roskos (1997, p.10) provided evidence for 'contexts of participation' where "children use the resources and constraints of the social and physical environment, as well as their relevant knowledge and skills, to analyse and construct their understandings of print and the world". Finally Wells Rowe (2008, p.387) demonstrated the "social construction of intentionality" in terms of what children might bring to writing events in her study of two-year-olds and writing at pre-school, where she concluded that the importance of understanding literacy experiences within the home context is crucial to support effective engagement with writing. She concluded with important implications for the writing curriculum but not pedagogic strategies; although she did suggest that this is an area that needs more research (Wells Rowe, 2008, p.428). Research demonstrates that children's writing does develop across pre-school; it therefore makes sense to identify how such development may be related to the opportunities early years practitioners provide children to experience writing (Gerde, Bingham and Pendergast, 2014).

The broader landscape of research contributing to a current understanding of effective early years pedagogy has been evolving over the past three, almost four decades. A starting point is the findings from the Oxford Pre-school Research Project (Joseph, 1980) with its clear outcomes in relation to an effective pedagogy that understands child development, play, cognition and learning, and the need to successfully promote language development. Such outcomes have been ratified in the light of findings from key longitudinal studies such as the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) Project (see Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell, 2002) and the Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) Project (Sylva et al., 2010). Both studies concluded that it is the quality of experiences in their pre-school settings that impacts most on children's longer-term educational outcomes. Effective pedagogy would therefore incorporate not only knowing how to deliver such quality experiences, but why such approaches were needed to support development and learning. Other studies of note include the Effective Early Learning (EEL) Project (Pascal and Bertram, 1997) and the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) Project (Moyle, Adams and Musgrove, 2002) with their focus on adult engagement. The EEL Project developed a way of measuring the qualities of effective teaching demonstrated by practitioners. These were recorded under three separate areas: sensitivity (to the feelings and emotional well being of the child); stimulation (in terms of how an adult might intervene in a learning process); and autonomy (for example the degree of

freedom a child has to experiment, choose activities and express ideas). Findings from projects such as these have had, and continue to have, implications for early years policy and practice. Significantly, the research teams from each project cited have worked in collaboration with the government of the time to develop cohesive structures for early years education, including appropriate curricula and directives for settings. The tendency for research such as this however has been to look at pedagogy from an overarching perspective, rather than focus on a subject included in the early years curriculum such as writing. This is again an anomaly when writing is included as a specific area of learning in the current EYFS (DfE, 2014) but perhaps understandable when there is a current lack of clarity into what writing looks like for the two-and-three-year-old child.

Three publications from the past five years have focused on quality education for children under the age of three and have reviewed current literature in relation to pedagogical aspects of practice in the England, the United States, and Australia (Dalli et al., 2011; Dalli, 2014; Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, and Ereky-Stevens, 2014). Georgeson, Campbell-Barr and Boag-Munroe (2014) conducted an exploratory study into provision and pedagogy for disadvantaged two-year-old children in England with a view to developing appropriate pedagogical strategies for effective intervention. Similarly, Dalli et al's (2011) review considered appropriate responses in relation to families with low socioeconomic status in New Zealand as well as families from indigenous cultures such as the Maori community. Georgeson et al (2014) define pedagogy as the way in which (or how) practitioners work with young children, first as a result of their knowledge and understanding of the age group, and second vis-a-vis appropriate actions and interactions. This most recent set of research agrees on the importance of the need for specialist approaches for children aged three years and under. To this end, tenets of effective pedagogy emerged, including practitioner knowledge and understanding of how young children grow and learn; creating the optimum learning environment; using language to support development and learning (including "the ability to interpret and respond to the subtle cues offered by infants" (Dalli et al., 2011, p.5 as outlined earlier in this literature review), and the role of relationships with families.

Practitioner knowledge and understanding of how young children grow and learn involves a fundamental understanding of what is appropriate developmentally at a certain age, and is considered crucial for effective early years pedagogy. Hattie (2012) describes such knowledge and understanding in terms of a practitioner mindset that first acknowledges the children they teach, who they are and what they know; but also how they develop in order to maximize impact on learning. It is from this secure knowledge base that the practitioner will be able to respond to children effectively. Berthelsen and Brownlee (2007) go further, describing the practitioner's desire to engage in this way as their personal epistemology. Effective pedagogy needs to be researched and understood by the practitioner so that they can develop their own personal epistemological foundation upon which to construct effective practice, a foundation which not only includes knowledge and understanding of how young children grow and learn, but also secure subject knowledge of all areas of the curriculum. It is this depth of knowledge argues Hattie (2012), which enables the practitioner to unravel and create the curriculum for children, as opposed to feeling constrained and disempowered by it or, simply not understanding it. Knowing what

children from the age of two are achieving in relation to writing development is therefore key to effective writing pedagogy, but so is knowing *why* children are engaging with such a discourse, and, I would argue, what the discourse looks like because as evidence in this literature review shows there is growing research evidence to suggest that it is much more than ‘mark making’ per se. The knowledge base surrounding writing below the age of three years is gradually increasing and it is now possible to begin to make comparisons across studies; suggestions on how to respond appropriately to such early engagement is therefore possible. There are implications for an effective writing pedagogy that builds on the importance of home-setting communication, but which also creates meaningful contexts for children to write in the setting. Practitioner knowledge and understanding also has implications for standards and training content, an additional ongoing debate even since the definitive Nutbrown Review (DfE, 2012), the last major review of the structure of early years provision in England which argued for both the need for and importance of higher levels of qualification amongst the early years workforce in order to improve standards for young children. Relating this precept to writing, practitioners need to understand how children’s writing develops in order to be able to respond appropriately in practice. There is a strong argument therefore that the development of writing should be included within the training content of any early years qualification.

The learning environment in early years settings is only part of the overall environment the learner inhabits however. While practitioners may not be able to influence the wider environments of family, community and society, research shows that the learning environment has a powerful influence on children’s achievements, and that children from similar social backgrounds progress at different rates depending on the setting they attend (Siraj and Taggart, 2014). Effective early years practice incorporates the role of systematic observation and formative assessment to permeate the whole of effective practice in order to be able to respond appropriately to children’s learning needs. This is a practice which falls under the philosophy of constructivism that supports the importance of developing and implementing a positive learning environment appropriate for specific ages and stages (Rushton and Juola-Rushton, 2008). The optimum learning environment should meet the learning needs of every child, a precept echoed in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) which states that every child should be responded to as an individual. Transposing this to an effective writing pedagogy, Wells Rowe and Neitzel (2010)’s research with twelve two-and-three-year-olds involved discovery of children’s preferred types of writing activities reflecting personal patterns of interest. The authors described this phenomenon in terms of a learning environment that enabled agency in relation to writing choice and argued that this type of response needs to be noted and responded to in order to keep children’s interest in and motivation for engaging with a discourse of early writing alive. Many early years settings typically include a writing area or writing table, although in a child-led environment this is often an area that is accessed independently by children. Children therefore need to understand its purpose. Practitioners also need to understand its purpose, for example they need to know a child’s motivation for using such an area and the type of writing activity that children might engage in. They also need to understand how children’s writing develops. This will enable individual responses that will give children clear messages about how their writing is valued. Research such as that conducted by Wells Rowe and Neitzel

(2010, p.193)'s four patterns of interest in writing amongst two-and-three-year-olds is therefore important when considering effective writing pedagogy; such wide ranging patterns of interest support the notion of understanding and recognising individual trajectories into writing for children of this age. Importantly, it also has implications for the range of writing resources and activities offered within the learning environment of any early years setting in order to support each child as an individual writer; regular reviews of the writing environment might also be a consideration therefore.

Research covered in this literature review such as that of MacWhinney (2000), which considers the way in which adults scaffold and model concepts about writing, builds on Vygotskian principles where in order to develop effective writing pedagogy, children need to develop an appropriate vocabulary or using the language of writing. Using the language of writing would acknowledge their position and perhaps support their identity as writers and certainly the fact that they already know something about the purpose and function of writing itself. With adult guidance, children would be able to begin to relate information about writing verbally. The adult fills in many details about language for the child and organises these into more coherent communications; development of a meta language for writing would therefore be influenced by verbal interactions with adults to support developing understanding of the uses and formats of writing. Indeed, the literature discussed in relation to children under the age of three demonstrates that understanding about such purpose and function is a fact (for example Neuman and Roskos, 1997; Lancaster, 2007; Yamagata, 2007). Language is a powerful tool for learning therefore, as is the role of the adult in shaping such interactions with the child. A final thought highlights the kind of language that practitioners use; how what is said and the way in which it is said might help children to feel positive about themselves as learners. Hughes and Vass (2001) have identified three types of language that are helpful in supporting learning and motivation. They are first the language of success where adults signal confidence to children of their ability to succeed. They might use a phrase such as "I know you can...", for example. Second, the language of hope creates an ethos where it is acceptable for children to say they will try but might need some help rather than saying outright, "I cannot do it". Practitioners could support with phrases such as, "What might help you?", encouraging children to think for themselves and problem-solve. Third, Hughes and Vass (2001) identify the language of possibility. Learners may express limits to their achievements with phrases such as "I don't know how to write it" or "Can you write it for me?" Practitioners can support a climate of greater possibility by the language used in response by suggesting strategies to support success, for example using a visual strategy such as copying a name from a name card. Pedagogical approaches such as these could have the potential to impact on children's perceptions of themselves as writers and their motivation to write in an environment that recognises and values their writing.

Another aspect of effective early years pedagogy is that of reciprocal relationships with families. The research project was interested in understanding the role that parents might have to play in supporting the development of children's writing. Chan-Cheng and Yuen (2006) argues that parents who are involved in their child's schooling exhibit increased self-confidence in their parenting. It might also increase parents' understanding of appropriate educational practices, especially literacy.

Following these lines of thinking, if indeed children are first learning about writing in their homes and communities (for example Teale and Sulzby, 1986), then there is an argument for strong communication between the home and early years setting as a significant element contributing to effective writing pedagogy. In England, there has been a relatively recent move towards a partnership model in which parents and practitioners work together to support the learning and development of young children. The government takes a stance whereby parents are perceived as co-educators of their children alongside the educational setting, (DfE, 2012), a stance which begins from birth, for example with the key person strategy adopted by many early years settings where one practitioner supports up to ten children and their parents or carers in a dedicated, targeted way. Information from home and knowledge about the child is deemed important to support appropriate responses in the educational setting. Research in relation to this argument has tended to focus on the quality of pre-school provision that settings offer, however continuing with the theme of literacy, researchers such as McNaughton (2001) and Marsh (2003) have also suggested that a task for early years settings is to more closely approximate to the type of literacy interactions that many children experience at home. A case has been made in this literature review for the significance of the home environment in serving as an important influence in the development of early literacy skills in children. It is the first setting within which literacy and language occurs (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Teale and Sulzby, 1986, Wells, 1986). Developing a strategy of parents as co-educators therefore begins with the need to make connections between in-setting and home-setting literacy knowledge and skills. The crux of this argument is that the impact of what is happening in a child's life should never be underestimated and knowledge of individual circumstances will serve to enable appropriate practitioner responses. This can of course include their writing needs.

The intention of this final section of the literature review has been to consider effective pedagogical approaches to enhance children's learning, a process that entails constant re-examination of practitioner assumptions and principles to determine a personal epistemology (Brownlee and Berthelson, 2007). Environments that recognize the need for "rich written language experiences" (Neuman and Roskos, 1997, p.10) provide opportunities for children to become naturally involved in writing-related events. Such settings include not only the physical learning environment, but adult interactions that determine when, how often, and in what situations children may engage in using writing, which includes access to materials, in addition to its uses and meanings (Neuman and Roskos, 1992). Vosniadou (2002) outlines principles for effective learning which echo lines of argument put forward in this literature review which are useful in drawing conclusions in relation to effective writing pedagogy. Learning for children is about their active involvement; it is about social participation and the creation of meaningful activities. Children need opportunities to relate new information to prior knowledge, to be strategic, and restructure and build on prior knowledge. They also need time to practice their skills. Fundamentally, children's writing development needs to be recognised and understood. In this way, their engagement with a discourse of early writing can be acknowledged, responded to, and built upon not only in developmentally appropriate ways but also in ways that respond to the unique nature of each child as a writing individual. This is arguably the starting point for creating an effective writing pedagogy that might also incorporate a rich writing environment in which every

child has the potential to make a valuable contribution, and a rich set of cultural resources and activities that can be deployed according to their known discourse of writing (Jensen, 2011).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented historical and theoretical conceptualisations of writing in order to reach a definition [of writing] on which to build subsequent discussion. It has outlined the premise of a developmental approach in learning to write which begins with early explorations of the functions and form of writing and culminates in an eventual ability to use conventional text. A section on the complexities of learning to write argued that writing is a competence that develops over time, aligning with a developmental approach. The chapter then focused on the development of writing from the age of two years. It has been argued that the scant research base relating to two-year-old children (in comparison to an established research base with children aged three years and above) would benefit from further validation through additional research being undertaken for this age group. Adult conceptualisations have been presented as central to the way in which children's early engagement with writing is interpreted or viewed. It has been argued that such a conceptualisation is perpetuated by government approaches and curriculum content which serves to constrain rather than enable true self-expression amongst two-and-three-year-old children in relation to writing. Such conceptualisations have additionally been explored in relation to a personal interpretation of Foucault's philosophical thinking surrounding how discourse of writing within society might be understood but which could be reframed within the parameters that government and curriculum ostensibly set. In particular it has been argued that conventional writing form has become a 'truth' located within policy documents for practitioners such as Development Matters (Early Education, 2012), the EYFS (DfE, 2014), and for parents What to expect when (4Children, 2015). A writing 'norm' is thus generated for particular ages and stages of development and writing cannot exist outside of this age/stage norm. Finally, the importance of the home literacy environment alongside that of the pre-school setting has been explored. A case for effective communication between the two environments as a key tenet of effective writing pedagogy has been made, but one which might need to be rooted in adult reconceptualisations of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children in order to provide the optimum writing environment across both contexts.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter describes and explains the methodology of the research. The research design was a qualitative case study that investigated the writing practices of nine two-and-three-year-old children and their families in an early years pre-school setting in a city in the East of England. It describes the exploratory nature and outcomes of a preliminary pilot study specifically designed to explore the initial premise that writing practices would be occurring for children from the age of two years old both at home and within their pre-school setting. The research design is described and is linked to the Foucaultian approach adopted for framing, analyzing, and interpreting the writing discourse. The research site, participants, time frame, and methods of data collection are discussed. A section on data analysis outlines Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for inductive thematic analysis which was used to support a systematic approach and which led to the development of a coding framework which could eventually be used across all data sets. A section on validity and participant validation follows, along with a reflective analysis of the researcher's role within the pre-school setting, including the challenges encountered in relation to being a participant observer. Finally, ethics are considered in terms of participation and voice amongst two-and-three-year-old children and knowing when it was time for the researcher to quietly withdraw from the field.

The researcher's standpoint was built on an assumption about the possible existence of discourse of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children attending the pre-school setting, a discourse which it was believed could emerge through a carefully constructed investigative approach. Whilst Yin's (2014) definition and categories of case study have been used to structure the research design overall, discussion regarding concepts relating to case study research and how it has been defined by others are additionally drawn upon in a more generic way within the chapter in order to address key issues such as rigour and validity. With an incomplete knowledge base in relation to children under the age of three years and their writing, the overall aim of the research was to discover the discourse of writing for one group of two-and-three-year-old children within the context of their pre-school setting, but also taking into account the potential influences of their home environment. The discourse of writing therefore extended to include the conceptualisations of the adults involved in the children's lives across these two contexts. In discovering the discourse of writing the research further aimed to investigate any rationale behind established writing pedagogy in the children's pre-school setting and writing approaches at home through a twofold process. It did this first through seeking a clear understanding of what children of this age already knew about the functions and purpose of writing; and second, through seeking a clear understanding from the perspective of the adults involved in their lives of how children expressed themselves through writing. It aimed to look for possible synergies and tensions between children's experiences of writing in both contexts. The intent was that through discovery of the discourse of writing optimum in-setting and home-setting writing environments could be established.

Philosophical and theoretical assumptions underlying the research project were drawn from the interpretivist paradigm. The research was subjective by nature in that it was interested in conceptualisations; in other words, what groups of stakeholders had to say and what they understood about young children's writing as a phenomenon. In this respect the data collected was not quantifiable through statistical analysis. Qualitative research assumes multiple realities, that the world is not an objective, constant and measurable place, but rather a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a world in which beliefs as opposed to facts form the basis of such perception and where meaning is intrinsically embedded within people's life experiences (Merriam, 1998). The interpretivist stance of the research also included the central tenet that the participant children were viewed as creators of meaning, able to actively construct their own understanding of the world from experience through interaction with their environment and with those around them. Bogden and Biklen (1992) argue that it is through such interaction that individuals are able to define or understand who they are and express themselves. This in turn enables the researcher to discover how participants conceptualise phenomena within a world that they both experience and create as a result of their engagement within it. To this end, attempts were being made to understand the meaning of interactions amongst the participants of the study in relation to their conceptualisations of writing.

A qualitative approach seemed logical for the research design, where discovery and explanation in relation to discourse of writing were priorities, for three further reasons. First, qualitative approaches are appropriate for studying phenomena in their natural settings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003); or, as Esterberg (2002) describes it, in seeking to understand social processes *in context* [italics mine]. The natural setting or context for the research was the children's early years pre-school setting, a place all stakeholder groups were familiar with and the physical space in which understanding regarding the children's engagement with writing was sought. Whilst there were some a-priori views held by the researcher in relation to what might be discovered based on previous research findings and the synthesis of a relevant literature base, at the start of the data collection period the participant children's discourse of writing was unresearched. Second, qualitative research supports a way of thinking about the world in which social phenomena are believed to exist within the context of relationships whose nature is not necessarily known or understood; either by a researcher or indeed those directly involved. In this respect it was not known how the participant children's discourse of writing might manifest itself in relation to the children's lives. Third, qualitative research supports a researcher in giving an explanation of the ways that people make sense of specific aspects of their lives or how, and perhaps why, they locate themselves within a certain discourse (Foucault, 1970; Pring, 2004). The study was interested in the ways that three stakeholder groups (staff members, parents, and children) both experienced and made sense of writing within the context of the children's pre-school setting and in their homes. Foucault's (1970) philosophy surrounding discourse and its function in society supports this line of thinking where discourse is socially embedded but its complexities, including the specifics regarding relationships amongst those involved, often remain unknown until it is unearthed.

3.1 The Pilot Study

An initial premise of the research was that writing practices would be occurring for at least some, if not all, of the participant children either at home, within the pre-school setting, or both. This premise was initially explored through the undertaking of a small pilot study in the pre-school setting in May 2014, involving one family with a child aged two years and ten months old who had been in regular attendance since January 2014. Whilst the main intention of a pilot study is to evaluate research methods, instruments of data collection, and some elements of the research design, the pilot also played a central role in establishing the viability of the main study, partly due to the lack of published research in the area under investigation. Observations of the child were written in narrative form and the child was aware that the researcher was simply interested in noting down what she enjoyed doing whilst she was at nursery. Her mother and the lead member of staff participated in semi-structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Outcomes of the pilot study were written up for the setting in the form of a detailed report on the participant child and their early writing behaviour, which was additionally shared with the child's parent (Appendix 1). The pilot study was also written up in the form of a paper, methodologically framed as an exploratory case study (Bradford, 2014). Yin (2014) argues that the purpose of exploratory case study is to identify the procedures to be used in a subsequent research study (p.238). In this way the process and outcomes of the pilot study provided a strong, contextualised basis for moving the main research project forwards and to inform the qualitative case study enquiry undertaken during the academic year 2014-15. The pilot study was significant in that it allowed time and space for continuing to shape the researcher's thinking and for considering the structure of the main research project. It facilitated discussion between the setting and the researcher regarding the practicalities and viability of the project which additionally received a positive response across an initially sceptical wider staff team following the lead member of staff's involvement. Discussion included ethical issues related to observing children from as young as two years' old, and transparency in relation to the purpose of the research with staff and parents. Following the pilot, a key outcome of such discussion was that the onset of data collection was delayed from September 2014 to January 2015, allowing a whole term for a new cohort of children to settle. The researcher was previously a nursery teacher of children aged three and four years old, and from teaching experience this was not an unreasonable request. Three-and-four-year-old children (and sometimes their parents) often take this period of time, the first term, to become familiar with and settled within their early years setting, and the research involved children of an even younger age. This first term was therefore used to prepare the ground for data collection to start promptly in January 2015, including generating the sample and gaining parental and staff member consent. Finally, undertaking the pilot study allowed time for reflecting on and finalising the research questions preceding the start of the main research project. The finalised research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What are the synergies and tensions between writing pedagogy in an early years pre-school setting and two-and-three-year-old children writing at home?

- b. What are children's, parents', and practitioners' conceptualisations of early writing?
 - c. How is early writing supported in the early years pre-school setting and at home?
2. How can practitioners' and parents' understandings of children's early writing practices lead to changes in writing pedagogy in the early years pre-school setting and approaches to writing at home?
- a. What is the rationale for changes in writing pedagogy?

The first research question was designed to elicit understanding of how two-and-three-year old children both engaged with and experienced writing, the meaning they attributed to it, and their own and adult conceptualisations of early writing. In other words, the first question and two sub questions framed the discovery of a current discourse of writing for the children. The second question allowed for the development of a potential rationale for change in approaches to supporting children's early writing as a result of any new understanding that might emerge from the discovery of such a discourse.

3.2 Research Design

The research design was framed within a methodological approach that would ultimately serve to reveal the nature of practitioners' and parents' beliefs about children's writing development, and the children's beliefs about their own writing development, which might also include their writing behaviours. As a result, the research adopted a qualitative explanatory case study design. It can be argued that case study research is neither restricted to one paradigm or one particular disciplinary orientation or another, and Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007) and Yin (2014) frame such flexibility in a positive light, arguing the usefulness of case study in adapting to accommodate either quantitative or qualitative approaches, or a mixture of both. It is this aspect of case study research that Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007, p.80) refer to as "transparadigmatic". Other researchers such as Pring (2004, p.40) align case study firmly within the qualitative paradigm due to its focus on the uniqueness of events "arising from their being shaped by the meanings of those who are the participants in the situation", a perspective that is central to the interpretivist's worldview. The second central line of thinking takes the notion of flexibility in another direction where it is argued that case study research allows for a level of adaptability within the intrinsic research design in that the researcher can respond to unexpected occurrences once data collection begins (Yin, 2014). Following this line of argument, case study cannot be described as an exact science.

Yin (2014, p.238) further defines three types of case study; exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Exploratory case study was used to frame the methodological approach taken in the writing up of the pilot study and to set out the basis for the viability of the main research project. The second type, descriptive case study, describes a phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context. The research was concerned with understanding and making evident the real-world context of two-and-three-year-old children and their writing experiences. Although description was

important, the intent of the research went beyond this, in that it was also looking for reasons why the children's discourse of writing manifested in the way it did. Explanatory case study incorporates explaining how, or why, some condition came to be, and it was therefore this third type that provided the appropriate framing to support the full intent of the research, reflected in the finalising of the research questions following the undertaking of the pilot study. Within explanatory case study the unearthing of constructs of discourse holds the potential to enable new understanding and explanation; and as Foucault (1970) would remind us, sometimes new understanding and explanation can lead to a reframing of the phenomenon under investigation and with it, perhaps, the impetus for change. Following this line of argument, investigation into any social phenomenon will allow for the gradual emergence of revelation regarding the interrelated nature of any phenomenon. This is akin to Foucault's (1970, p.54) "will to truth", or desire to discover "true discourse". The emergence of true discourse has the potential to enable an account of events that provides a causal description in relation to what has been discovered (although not in the positivist sense). The phrasing of the study's research questions encompassed the possibility of investigation into causal links through investigation into synergies and tensions surrounding children's writing discourse. The notion of causality sits well within Foucault's considerations of truth and power relations, which, he argued, help us to discover not only the way in which we think about a particular phenomenon, but also, importantly, why we think about it in the way that we do. Finally, Baxter and Jack (2008, p.544) argue that case study research "supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena", which by implication would include understanding 'why' the phenomena under investigation functions the way it does; why it is as it is.

Causality can also be looked at from the perspective of the development of theory, through making connections between what is known (through an empirically established fact, or facts) and linked outcomes (connections) that can be proven (Goldman, 1967). Such connections make sense through evidence-based interpretation of empirically established facts; in other words, proving elements of cause and effect. For example, a broad statement encapsulating children's literacy development can be stated thus: research has firmly established that children's early language and literacy experiences impact significantly on their long-term literacy outcomes (Wells, 1986; Sylva et al., 2010). Looking at this statement with a view to applying the precept of causal theory, it can be argued that children's early literacy experiences have been studied consistently over the past four decades in particular providing a sufficient body of corroborative, empirically established evidence to be able to state as fact that children's early literacy experiences do indeed impact on later literacy outcomes; but also conversely in this case that later literacy outcomes can be traced back to early literacy experiences (thus revealing how a causal connection can sometimes travel in both directions as for example in Scheuer et al's (2006) exploration of children's autobiographies of learning to write). Developing theories of causal connections has helped to shape thinking about different facets of literacy. Goswami and Bryant (1990) for example established a theory of causal connections in reading. Three causal connections were proposed: a connection between pre-school awareness of rhyme and alliteration and later progress in reading and spelling; a connection between phonics tuition and the development of phonemic awareness; and a two-way cause and effect connection between progress in reading

and progress in spelling. Goswami and Bryant's third connection was originally suggested by Frith (1985), who discovered causal links between children's reading and spelling ability. Frith argued that children first acquire orthographic knowledge through reading and then later, as a consequence, transfer this knowledge to spelling (see Davis and Bryant, 2006, p.849). This third connection does not follow a strict developmental pattern; it is two-way because whilst strongly related to each other, the time-course of their development is not strictly identical (Davis and Bryant, 2006, p.849).

The world of neuroscience reveals much about the brain and children's potential for literacy development where, for example, causal connections have been established in relation to children's language development (Kuhl, 2004; Goswami, 2008; Hruby, Goswami, Frederiksen, and Perfetti, 2011). The development of communication and language skills happens in a particular window of brain development, during so-called 'sensitive periods' when the brain is far more impressionable (neuroscientists use the term plastic) in early life than in maturity. This plasticity has both a positive and a negative side. On the positive side, it means that young children's brains are more open to learning and enriching influences. On the negative side, it also means that young children's brains are more vulnerable to developmental problems should their environment prove especially impoverished or un-nurturing. Kuhl (2004) has established for example that an absence of early exposure to the patterns that are inherent in natural language, whether spoken or signed, produces life-long changes in a child's ability to learn language. She highlights the importance of the impact of social interaction on children's language development in both speech production and speech perception. The few instances in which children have been raised in social isolation have shown that social deprivation has a severe and negative impact on language development, to the extent that normal language skills may never be acquired (Kuhl, 2008, p.836). Longobardi, Rossi-Arnaud and Spataro (2011) undertook a longitudinal examination of early communicative development assessing the verbal and non-verbal communicative abilities of a sample of 104 children at 12, 16, and 20 months of age using a data collection tool called the Questionnaire for Communication and Early Language (QCEL). The main focus of the research was on the "identification of early communicative profiles significantly associated with later linguistic development, both in normal and risk conditions" (p.586). Longobardi, Rossi-Arnaud and Spataro (2011)'s study revealed three main findings. First, that both verbal and non-verbal variables predicted the level of language development at 23 months. Second, children classified at-risk with the QCEL had reduced vocabulary size and a lower number of sentences at 23 months; and third, early individual differences in the use of words and gestures were associated with later differences in linguistic abilities. Research such as that by Kuhl (2004) and Longobardi, Rossi-Arnaud and Spataro (2011) is important in relation to causal theory and language development because it shows categorically through empirical data that there are factors which impact on cause and effect during this critical period of a child's life.

Whilst significant research can be found to support causal theory in the areas of reading and language development, the same cannot be said for causal theory and writing. In a search of the literature using the key search terms 'causal theory', 'pre-school children' and 'writing', only two papers were found; one describing cause and

effect by Bullock and Gelman (1979) and the other describing pre-school children's understanding of causal connections in general terms (Bullock, 1984). Neither paper however referred to children's early writing. Two papers were found that included the term 'writing', although these related to older children: Parke and Drury (2000) described causal connections between speech and writing in bilingual children aged 6 and 7 years' old; and Pretorius (1996) looked at profiles of causal development amongst ten-year olds and the implications for reading and writing therein, arguing that as children acquire more knowledge they demonstrate more and wider applications of what he termed causal inferencing. Applying the notion of causal inferencing to much younger, developing writers, one could take as an example Ferreiro and Teberosky's (1982) argument that children infer hypotheses about how the print world works based on their understanding of the functions and forms of writing. The terms 'hypotheses' and 'causal inferencing' are interchangeable in this respect. A child must be able to build up evidence of the functions and forms of writing through observation in order to then experiment and investigate how writing 'works' with systematic purpose. If pre-school children are experimenting with the functions and forms of writing in this way, then it follows that they must perceive themselves to be writers in order to be able to follow through their thinking. Indeed, Goldman (1967, p.358) speaks of the causal theory of perception; "perhaps the simplest case of a causal chain connecting some fact *p* with someone's belief of *p* is that of *perception*."

3.4 The Research Site

The research was undertaken within an early years pre-school setting situated in a city in Eastern England. The pre-school setting was part of a larger, established Early Years Centre which included a maintained local authority nursery school capable of accommodating up to 110 children, separate provision for two-and-three-year-olds (the pre-school setting in which the research was undertaken), a joint Children's Centre, a community childcare hub, and a teaching school. Data from the Centre's 2014 Ofsted Report stated that just fewer than 80% of families were of White British heritage, with the remaining groups being from a very wide range of race and cultures. Children in the Centre were known to speak up to 30 different languages. The Centre had identified particular target groups as teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers, two-year old children, lone parent families and those with English as an additional language (EAL learners), living in the most disadvantaged areas in its reach. Of the families living in the area served by the Centre, approximately 282 children lived in households where families suffered from either income deprivation or were living in poverty. Within the reach area there were approximately 1,185 children under five years of age. Of these, 67% were registered with the Centre. The Early Years Centre had a history of 'outstanding' Ofsted grades and was well known for its reflective and forward thinking approaches to innovative approaches in relation to supportive teaching and learning. Its popularity meant that places could be limited as it was usually over-subscribed. Provision for two-year-olds had evolved since 2012, the initial cohort drawn largely from the current government intervention scheme in England of funded-twos families (DfE, 2011) and described in the Literature Review of this dissertation. A child was deemed to be of pre-school setting age from the beginning of the term following their 2nd birthday until 31st August

following their 3rd birthday. Whilst in theory this meant that children could feasibly join at the start of either the autumn, spring, or summer term throughout the academic year, the reality was that all places had been taken at the start of the autumn term in the year in which the research took place. At the time the research was undertaken, the cohort within the pre-school setting also included children who were not included in the funded-twos scheme to a ratio of approximately 50:50. The pre-school setting provision for two-and-three-year-olds offered sessional places for up to 16 children during term time only. The children could potentially arrive at 8.30am in the morning for breakfast and stay until 5.45pm in the evening. Timings were as follows: 8.30am – 9.00am Breakfast; 9.00am – 12.00pm Morning; 12.00pm – 1.00pm Lunch; 1.00pm – 4.00pm Afternoon; 4.00pm – 5.45pm Tea time and play.

The pre-school setting aimed to create a ‘home from home’ atmosphere for the children who attended. It was set away from the main nursery in a specially extended, unique part of the building and had its own garden and outside area. Those children who stayed for lunch remained in the pre-school setting during this period of time when an eating area would be set up each day and then cleared away ready for the afternoon session to start. Some integration with the main Centre was encouraged, for example accompanied trips to the Centre library in pairs or small groups, or attending events in the Centre’s main hall. Parents would also be encouraged to join in with their children with wider Centre events that took place, for example the annual Autumn Fair. The pre-school setting was run by a staff team of six individuals, one of whom, the Room Leader, took overall responsibility for its day-to-day management. Each child was allocated a key person, who became the main point of contact for them and their parents and whose role it was to support the child to feel safe, confident and happy within the setting. The key person was also tasked with taking an active role in getting to know not only the child but also their parents. Parents were encouraged to communicate with their child’s key person, for example discussing their child’s interests with the idea that the setting could then build on what happened at home and so plan appropriately for the child’s learning and care. Care from the age of two years included regular nappy changing for some children. Independence and choice were encouraged amongst the cohort, for example feeding oneself, pouring drinks, toileting oneself out of nappies, dressing appropriately for the outdoor weather, and deciding which activities to engage with throughout the course of a session. The sessions were further punctuated by regular indoor and outdoor times, a snack time, tidy up time towards the end of the morning or afternoon (where the children were encouraged to put everything they had been using away), and circle time (when songs and rhymes were sung together as a whole group). Once a fortnight a music specialist came in to the setting to lead circle time.

3.5 Participants

The sample included members of staff, parents, and their children. Initially all six members of staff working in the early years setting gave their consent to participate in the research project following the strong outcomes of the pilot study. In addition, 10 families gave their consent to participate in the main study. The participant families were generated using purposive sampling. The rationale behind this choice was “fitness for purpose” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.104), where the

sample was built up to satisfy the needs of the research project (Robson, 2011, p.275). All families who had been offered early years provision for their two-and-three-year-old children in the pre-school setting during the academic year 2014-15 were therefore sent a letter introducing the researcher, describing the research project, and inviting them to participate (see Appendix 2). Of a total of the 16 families approached, 10 originally gave consent to participate, however only nine families continued their involvement for the entire duration of the study due to one of the families dropping out as a result of spending three extended periods of time abroad during the data collection period. The involvement of nine families not only ensured manageability of the sample, but also gave space for thick description in the reporting of the findings. An objective of the reporting was that the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals could be heard (Denzin, 1983, p.83). Table 3.1 gives an overview of background information on the participant families and their children, where the children are listed in age order from oldest to youngest at the start of the data collection period.

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Table 3.1 The Participant Families and their Children

Pseudonym/first name (where consent given)	Age (at start of data collection)	Family Members	Languages Spoken at Home	DfE Funded Two?
Alyssa	3 years, 4 months	Mother	English, occasional Bangladeshi	Yes
Vivian	3 years, 3 months	Mother, father Older brother, aged 5 years	English	No
Francesca	3 years, 3 months	Mother Younger sister, aged 3 months	English and occasional Spanish	Yes
Myra	3 years, 3 months	Mother, father	English	No
Sofia	3 years, 2 months	Mother Middle child, older sister aged 8 years, younger sister aged 1 year	English and Spanish	Yes
John	2 years, 11 months	Mother, father Older sister aged 8 years, older brother aged 7 years	English	No
Anyia	2 years, 10 months	Mother, father Older brother, aged 6 years	Russian (first language), English, and Spanish	No
Amy	2 years, 8 months	Mother	English	Yes
Bryn	2 years, 8 months	Mother, father Older sister, aged 4 years	English	No

From an age-related viewpoint, the first five children, Alyssa, Vivian, Francesca, and Myra, were at this point technically too old for the pre-school setting. They were all however waiting for places in the adjacent Early Years Centre nursery to become available, their parents reluctant to move them to a new setting altogether. Alyssa was the eldest child in the study and towards the end of the fieldwork period was offered a place in one of the Centre's nursery classrooms. Sofia was not yet fluent in English and her mother felt she was better placed in the pre-school setting where there was a smaller adult: child ratio (1:4 as opposed to 1:10 in the Centre nursery). Consent in relation to the young age of the children is considered later in the ethics section of this chapter.

3.6 Access

Participation was negotiated with the Head Teacher following the researcher initially approaching the Centre and submitting a research proposal. Access was originally granted for only the pilot study to take place, which proved an important stage in convincing staff members that the research project was worthwhile and viable. Access to the pre-school setting for the main study was then agreed following the success of the pilot study and as a result of joint discussion with the Head Teacher and Room Leader. The researcher was permitted to attend one day a week, the same day each week, during term-time from January 2015 onwards, to undertake narrative observations within the setting. It was also agreed that additional access would be granted for staff member interviews and parent interviews to be conducted on other days of the week during the data collection period, should this prove more convenient for participants. For example, one participant child was dropped off and picked up by a grandparent on the researcher's regular day in the setting but her mother was able to meet on other days. A private room was made available for the interviews to take place in. The researcher was previously a teacher at the Centre (almost two decades ago) and had since maintained good communication links with staff, although the early years pre-school setting staff were not previously known to her. She was ostensibly familiar with the ethos of the Centre, the daily routines and ways of working. Rather than enter the field from a position of subjectivity and predisposed supposition however, the knowledge and understanding already gained through previous participation in the wider setting enabled the researcher to be "context-sensitive", flexible and respectful with regard to her approach to the research (Holloway and Todres, 2003, p.345). The research began with an informal visit to the early years pre-school setting ahead of the pilot study to observe the environment, to be amongst the children and to become familiar with specific routines and to be introduced to staff members for whom an information sheet had been prepared (see Appendix 3). The research project was originally conceived of as the WiSH approach. WiSH stood for Writing in the Early Years Setting and Home to give the participant adults a concrete conceptualisation of the nature and purpose of the research project.

3.7 Time Frame

The time frame was encompassed within three core phases to coincide with the three terms of the academic year, as follows: Phase One from September 2014 to December 2014; Phase Two from January 2015 to March 2015; and Phase Three from April 2015 to May 2015 (Table 3.2). The development of writing and the writing environment in the early years pre-school setting and across the wider Children's Centre became a target for the School Development Plan for the academic year 2015-16, with which the researcher was invited to be involved. This was a surprise outcome of the study and eventually marked the beginning of a fourth phase of the research which began to involve the wider staff team across the Centre, and work with parents.

3.8 Methods of Data Collection

A researcher's epistemological orientation is important in establishing appropriate methods of data collection which should emerge logically from their world perspective (Crotty, 2003; Yin, 2014). Christensen and James (2000) have additionally argued that for any piece of research, what is important is that the particular methods chosen should be appropriate for those involved in the study. In case study research the researcher decides on various research methods which act to build or uncover the case (Van Wynsberghe and Khan's (2007). In this respect there was a logic to the choice of methods of data collection chosen described in relation to their purpose and role in discovery of writing discourse, or discourses. Baxter and Jack (2008, p.544) further argue that rigorous, qualitative case studies use a variety of data sources which they argue can be viewed as a variety of lenses through which multiple facets of the phenomenon can be revealed and understood. Methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews with the child's parents and with staff from the setting, naturalistic observation, writing samples, a document review, and field notes recorded in a research journal to document the researcher's own reflections of the research process. Table 3.2 below summarises the time frame for the research with methods of data collection included for each phase of the research, where appropriate. through generating sufficient data for triangulation to be able to address the project's research questions.

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Table 3.2 Time frame of the Research with Procedure and Methods of Data Collection

Phase	Procedure and Methods of Data Collection
Phase One, September 2014 to December 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissemination of pilot study findings to the pre-school setting team and introduction of the main study within the wider Children's Centre • Invitations to parents to participate in the study sent out towards the end of term • Research journal started
Phase Two, January 2015 to March 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews with parents • Semi-structured interviews with staff • Weekly naturalistic observations within the pre-school setting with a focus on the participant children's writing actions and interactions • Dated samples of the children's writing collected, where possible
Phase Three, April 2015 to May 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final weekly naturalistic observations within the pre-school setting • Focus group review meeting with pre-school setting staff • Withdrawal from the pre-school setting (May half term 2015) • Beginnings of data analysis •
Phase Four, October 2015 to April 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissemination of tentative findings to wider staff across the Centre (October 2015) • Working with the Centre Literacy Coordinator (as findings became finalized) • Launch of the WiSH Project across the setting and home (Writing in the Early Years Setting and Home) via staff training and parent workshops

Discourse of writing was expected to emerge through a carefully constructed investigative approach. Additionally, methods of data collection were chosen in line with rigorous case study inquiry where multiple sources of evidence allow for comprehensive triangulation of data (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014, p.17). Table 3.3 gives an overview of data sets and their purpose.

Table 3.3 Summary of Data Sets

Data set	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews with staff members	Discovery of the pre-school setting writing environment Discovery of pedagogical approaches to supporting children's writing within the pre-school setting Discovery of staff conceptualisations of writing
Semi-structured interviews with parents	Discovery of the home writing environment, including parents' responses to writing Discovery of parents' conceptualisations of writing
Naturalistic Observations Writing samples	Discovery of the pre-school setting writing environment Discovery of pedagogical approaches to supporting children's writing within the pre-school setting Discovery of children's conceptualisations of writing through noting their writing actions and interactions
Document Review	Discovery of current writing practice within the pre-school setting, including responses to national early years writing policy and curriculum documents
Research Journal	Addressing subjectivity and potential bias Reflecting on the impact of the researcher on the research process
All data sets above	Discovery of discourse of writing across the three stakeholder groups; staff members, parents, and children

3.8.1 Document Review

A document review was undertaken of national early years curriculum and policy documents, and incorporating information from the pre-school setting prospectus, the website and the then current Children's Centre Writing policy. This was the least intrusive method of data collection involved in that it was conducted without disturbing the setting in any way at all. Prior to the main study, the document review was undertaken to try to discover then current approaches to writing practice across

the wider Early Years Centre. No information about writing was available online via the pre-school setting website. A paper copy of the Literacy Policy was found in the foyer of the Early Years Centre (the website directed parents to these). The policy covered children's reading and writing development in line with the specific area of learning termed Literacy in the EYFS (DfE, 2014). The Writing section of the policy referred to children's "mark making" as part of the emergent process of writing development. The Centre Literacy Coordinator explained that use of this phrase was in line with government wording in the publication *Mark Making Matters*, (DCSF, 2008) and in the EYFS (DfE, 2014). A comprehensive governor report following a visit to the Early Years Centre in 2012 highlighted a wide range of writing and mark making opportunities for children in both the indoor and outdoor learning environments of the nursery using a range of different media from paintbrushes, to chalks, to using a twig in mud, and pens and pencils. An early years expert had also visited the pre-school setting in June 2014 with a view to making suggestions about the organisation of the learning environment. Comments had been made in this report in relation to creating appropriate spaces for children to write. The Head Teacher had additionally created a file on writing in the Early Years Centre for Ofsted which contained examples of children writing across the early years curriculum, for example recording numbers in Mathematics and labelling in science (*Understanding the World in the EYFS* (DfE, 2014)). In line with current early years practice, the children all had individual files called their learning journey. A learning journey is used as a holistic way of recording key evidence of how a young child learns and develops as they move through the EYFS (DfE, 2014). The participant children's learning journeys were examined to extend the researcher's knowledge of each of them. Administrative information was included in these such as date of birth and family composition, in addition to documentation of learning.

3.8.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The purpose of undertaking semi-structured interviews was for staff members to individually share and review the ethos for writing and the writing environment in the pre-school setting and for parents to individually share their ethos for writing in the home and to describe the writing environment. Semi-structured interviews with the staff members and parents were therefore undertaken with the specific aim of exploring the children's setting and home writing experiences. Questions were based on and related to the study's research questions and objectives. An interview format was devised for both sets of interviews to provide some degree of systematisation; initial questions were the same for each staff member interview and each parent interview, thus providing some comparable data across and between participant groups. Open-ended questions gave opportunity for staff members and parents to talk about two-and-three-year-old children's writing "in their own way" (Miller and Horton, 1977, p.29), using their own words. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone, and later transcribed for analysis.

3.8.3 Naturalistic Observation

A series of 16 naturalistic observations were undertaken on the same day once a week during term time within the pre-school setting. Observations were dated and written directly into the same notebook which also doubled as the researcher's

research journal. Observations are often a primary source of data in the undertaking of qualitative case study research making it possible to record behaviour as it is happening (Merriam, 1988, Stake 1995, 2006). One of the distinctive features of qualitative research is that it seeks to document naturally occurring contexts (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). The natural world under investigation was the writing that occurred within the setting; the what and the how of it (Yin, 2014). In this respect, naturalistic observation as a means of data collection focuses on meaning in context. Not only was the context of the setting important to consider with regard to the study, but the series of naturalistic observations undertaken gave additional context to data gathered by other chosen methods, both enriching and supplementing it. It was also an appropriate method of data collection in that the ethos within the pre-school setting meant that children were not guided towards writing activity, rather when and if they chose to engage in such events, naturalistic observation became the means of ‘capturing’ and documenting them (Brooker, 2006).

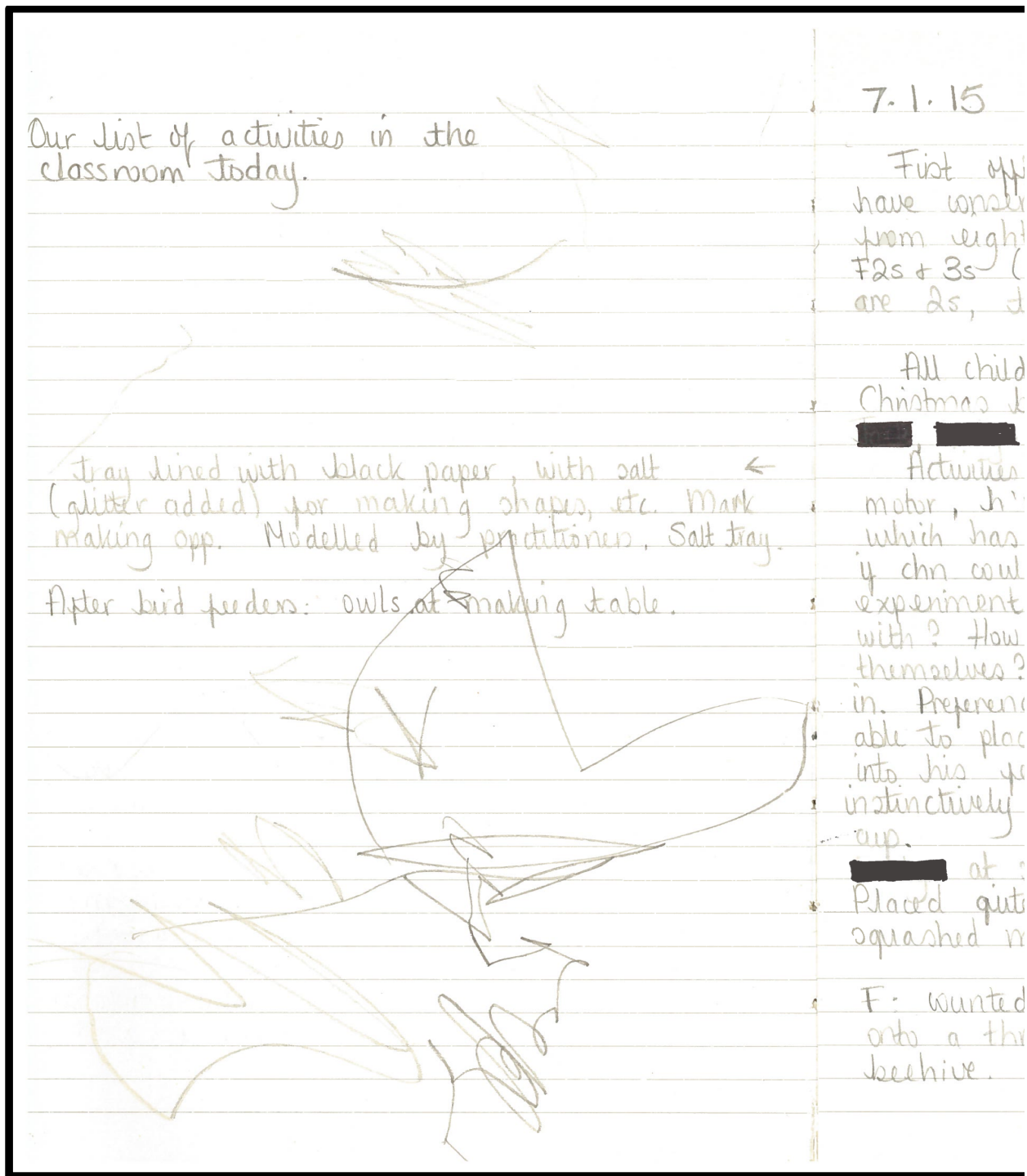
The researcher initially proposed a series of short naturalistic observations of the children in their homes during the period of data collection in addition to undertaking observations within the early years pre-school setting. The purpose of such action was to ostensibly observe the children’s home writing environment. During the pilot study, the participant parent was reluctant to allow the researcher into her home, which resulted in rethinking this aspect of data collection. Observing in participant homes was further considered a challenge in that children might be encouraged to ‘perform’ for the researcher and handed writing materials whilst she was present, thus weakening the benefits of naturalistic observation. In view of the perceived limitations of home visits the researcher concentrated on building relationships of trust with the participant parents. Building the relationship included the researcher providing an information sheet of what parents might expect to see their child doing at home in relation to writing activity. This was referred to during the parent interviews to try to gain as accurate a perception as possible of the writing environment at home (see Appendix 3).

3.8.4 Children’s Writing Samples

Where possible, dated samples of the children’s writing from the pre-school setting were collected and either photographed or photocopied so that the original could be kept by the child. Some children chose to write in the researcher’s research journal however, so in these cases the originals were retained. Samples were sometimes discussed with the children, for example if they were produced whilst engaged alongside the researcher, or if they were observed writing by an adult who might then have commented on what they were doing. To preserve anonymity, where possible, names were redacted from writing samples where children had written them down conventionally, for example on a painting or in a card they had made. Permission was additionally sought from two of the parents to use the child’s first name in samples where removal of their name would have meant the true meaning of the piece would have been lost.

3.8.5 Research Journal

Dated field notes were taken and recorded in a research journal which also documented the researcher's weekly observations in the pre-school setting and also reflections of the entire research process, including dilemmas and challenges (Gray, 2014). The researcher's research journal ultimately helped to provide a reflexive appraisal of the research experience as well as documenting the series of naturalistic observations undertaken throughout the fieldwork period (see Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2013). The journal was a small purple book, and therefore known and recognised by the children in the pre-school setting and was spontaneously added to by them from the researcher's first day in the setting (see Figure 3.1). In this sense it was an open document within the pre-school setting, however the staff team did not have access to it in the same way that the children did.



Our list of activities in the classroom today.

7.1.15

First opp
have wiser
from veigh
F2s + 3s (are 2s, d

All child
Christmas

Tray lined with black paper, with salt (glitter added) for making shapes, etc. Mark making opp. Modelled by practitioners. Salt tray.

After bird feeders: owls at making table.

Activities motor, J which has if chn could experiment with? How themselves? in. Preference able to place into his yr instinctively up.

Placed quite squashed in

F: wanted onto a the beehive.

Figure 3.1 Example pages from the researcher's "purple book"

3.9 Data Analysis

All handwritten and audio recorded data were transcribed into Word files and uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software tool NVivo. This included both interview data sets and individual files of each of the naturalistic observations (both general observations and any relating to each individual participant child). Another file contained details of observed instances where children had interacted together in writing events. Writing samples were scanned as PDF files and uploaded to NVivo. Even as data collection was ongoing, some patterns of writing behaviour had begun to emerge and these were documented in the research journal, alongside reflective comments. These dated notes were also collated together into one file and uploaded to NVivo. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for inductive thematic analysis was used to support a systematic approach to data analysis. Table 3.4 outlines this process, reproduced from the original paper. Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish two types of analysis, inductive and theoretical thematic analysis, and it was this distinction that helped to distinguish two important stages of data analysis required for the accurate interpretation of findings. An inductive approach can be described as a process through which codes, and ultimately themes emerge from the data itself. Interrogating the data in this way led to the gradual emergence of a coding framework that was eventually applied consistently across all data sets, the final outcome of which was the presentation of findings in written form. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this six-phase process as the analytic narrative. Their second type of thematic analysis is theoretical thematic analysis, where the findings can be interrogated in the context of the researcher's use of theoretical framing. Theoretical thematic analysis in the form of a Foucaultian treatment was therefore applied once the discourse of writing had been established through the initial inductive process. This is also in line with Foucault's (1970) notions of the necessity of discovery of any discourse first in order to then be able to accurately understand, deconstruct and reframe the phenomenon at hand.

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Table 3.4. Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) Six-phase Process for Inductive Thematic Qualitative Data Analysis

Phase	Description of the Process
1 Familiarising yourself with the data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2 Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3 Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential theme, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4 Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5 Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6 Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Initially the data was read through several times to look for “patterns, insights or concepts that seemed promising” (Yin, 2014, p.135). This was undertaken both during and after the period of data collection, for example rereading narrative observation notes and creating memos in the research journal on an ongoing basis as part of a reflective exercise after each pre-school setting visit. Beginning with the staff member interviews, the first full data set collected, transcribed and uploaded to NVivo, initial codes were identified. The codes were then applied across both the staff member data set and the parent interview data set, incorporating phases 3, 4, and 5 above. As a result of this process the coding framework underwent a series of revisions until it satisfactorily ‘worked’ in relation to enabling accurate analysis of both the staff and parent interviews, and then, increasingly, all additional data sets. Themes were only perceived as important when they captured something in relation to the overall research questions (Gray, 2014). The researcher had additionally written memos in the research journal throughout the data collection period. Corbin and Strauss (2007) argue that the use of memos beginning during fieldwork and into the analysis stage contain hints and clues with regard to preliminary interpretation of data, however Yin (2014) goes further, arguing that the undertaking of this process is about effectively conceptualising the data on an ongoing basis as it is collected.

Memos were also added directly onto individual files once they were uploaded to NVivo and used as signposts to help create links between data sets and as a way to record potential lines of enquiry to follow before they were forgotten or overlooked. Once each data set was analysed using the coding framework (see Table 3.5), further comparison was undertaken across the data sets, thus enabling a growing and increasingly in-depth understanding of the overall discourse of writing across the participant stakeholder groups.

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Table 3.5 Coding Framework

Main Code	Definition	Subcodes
The Writing Environment	Writing opportunities available in the pre-school setting and at home.	<p>Writing Environment in the Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing resources • Space to write <p>Writing Environment at Home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing resources • Space to write
Children's Writing Activity	Writing composition and skills development activity that children engaged in in the pre-school setting and at home.	<p>Composition in the Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimenting with Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Demonstrating understanding of written form ○ Demonstrating understanding of audience (who the writing is intended for) <p>Composition at Home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experimenting with Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Demonstrating understanding of written form ○ Demonstrating understanding of audience <p>Skills Development Activity in the Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development resources • Space to develop skills <p>Skills Development Activity at Home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development resources • Space to develop skills

Collaborative and Independent Writing	Children writing alone or with others in the pre-school setting and at home.	In the Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing collaboratively • Writing independently At Home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing collaboratively • Writing independently
Conceptualisations of Writing	Children's, parents' and pre-school staff members' perceptions of writing.	Conceptualisations in the Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children • Staff Members Conceptualisations at Home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children • Parents
Talking about Writing	The language used to talk about, interpret, or describe writing.	In the Setting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child and Staff Member • Parent and Staff Member • Staff Member and Staff Member • Peer and Peer At Home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child and Parent
The Influence of the Researcher	The researcher's explicit role in providing guidance, and her implicit influence throughout the data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering information • Offering explanation • Role within the setting • Impact within the setting

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In all, four major revisions of the coding framework were undertaken. As an example of the analytic process applied, one of the final themes was Children's Writing Activity. Emerging indications from the data to support the development of children's writing activity as an initial code were as follows: writing events were occurring in the children's pre-school setting and at home; children were experimenting with the conventions of writing from an early age in both contexts. Children also demonstrated an understanding of the difference between drawing and writing across the sample, irrespective of whether they were two or three years' old. Some children had additionally demonstrated understanding of genre and audience, for example a get well card. Finally, the children were engaging in skill developing activities through everyday interactions with resources both in the pre-school setting and at home, for example jigsaws. The theme initially began as two separate codes; Children's Writing Activity in the Pre-school Setting and Children's Writing Activity at Home. The gradual emergence of Children's Writing Activity as a final theme with subcodes to describe similar approaches to writing in both the pre-school setting and home was supported by increasing familiarity with and deeper understanding of the data sets as they were read, the increasingly refined use of language to describe more precise writing activity across different contexts, and including the creation of a clear definition. Undertaking systematic thematic analysis in this way led to phase 6 of Braun and Clarke's framework, the development of the written version of the findings.

The methodological limitation of not making home visits was also reflected in the data analysis. Although the observations undertaken within the early years pre-school setting were triangulated by other data sets, the parents' responses recorded during their interviews were not triangulated in the same way. The researcher relied on the relationships of trust built up with the parents over the five-month period of time spent in the early years setting as a measure of the validity of the parents' responses. The parent interviews were undertaken part way through the fieldwork period rather than at the very beginning of the research study as an additional methodological choice intended to ensure that the validity of the views of the parents. However, it is noted that the parents' views offer a perspective that is reported rather than observed, something which should be taken into account when reading the findings of the research.

3.10 Validity within Case Study Research

Defining the type of case study used to frame the research project, that of explanatory case study, supported the researcher's thinking with regard to validity, where validity was perceived as achievable through the development of a clear conceptual framework from the outset and by maintaining a consistent epistemological stance. Validity within case study research is made further possible through taking a systematic and rigorous approach, for example through careful attention to the study's design and the way in which data is collected, analysed, and interpreted (Simpson and Tuson, 1995). In this way not only does the qualitative researcher unearth underlying constructs of patterns of relationships that define social phenomena, but can show clearly the process through which such outcomes have been determined. In this respect case study can be described as a particular type

of research inquiry similar to the way that one might describe other types of inquiries such as an experiment or survey (Yin, 2014). Following this line of thinking, case study research takes on a more formal label, and, I would argue, when perceived in this way, supports the notion of rigour and validity within its construct. Cho and Trent (2006) have argued that traditionally validity in qualitative research has involved determining the degree to which researchers' claims about knowledge correspond to the reality being studied; in other words, I would argue that the context specific nature of qualitative research must be acknowledged as inherent to the case. The findings of this research were relevant for the setting in which it was undertaken, a fact which the researcher was conscious of throughout. The research design included multiple methods of data collection which Buchbinder, Longhofer, Barrett, Lawson, and Floersch (2006) argue are a major strength of case study research, helping to "broaden the analytic lens" (p.59) in support of a wider, clearer, and more accurate perspective. The researcher was interested in listening to the voices of all stakeholder groups and to hear and document them authentically. The use of multiple methods of data collection therefore enabled a fuller, richer explanation for each group, including the children involved.

Another line of thinking in relation to validity in qualitative case study research suggests that qualitative studies by their nature cannot be replicated because of an interpretivist assumption that the social world is always being constructed and the real world can therefore never be constant. Foucault's (2002) notions of knowledge and truth as constant discovery and rediscovery, along with possibilities for shifting dynamics relating to change supports this perception. Marshall and Rossman (2011) more specifically argue that case study research is context and time specific, providing outcomes relevant to a specific point in time. A key point to make is that the discourse of writing documented within this dissertation was intended to capture just such a specific moment in time; it happened at a certain place and with certain groups of children and adults (the stakeholders) and in this sense it is their narrative and theirs alone and cannot be repeated. Case studies do not claim to be necessarily typical or representative however; they do not claim external validity, the degree to which the results can be generalised to a wider population; "one selects a case study because one wishes to understand the particular in depth, not because one wants to know what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 1988, p.173). Case studies can perhaps be described therefore as 'telling' rather than typical. Stake (1995) has further suggested that case studies are usually studies of particularisation rather than generalisation and that the emphasis must therefore be on the particular uniqueness of the case. Following this line of thinking, the research interpretations and findings in this piece of qualitative research were context-specific and confined to the particular explanatory case. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.25) describe the case as, "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context". In other words, the explanatory case study described was bounded by the phenomenon of writing amongst nine two-and-three-year old children and their families, four of whom were considered to be 'disadvantaged', through their socioeconomic status, a category defined by the DfE in England and outlined in the Literature Review. The case was also bound by time in that it took place over the course of one academic year. The case was selected specifically to further understanding of engagement with writing, particularly amongst two-year-old children, an age group for whom limited research in this area currently exists.

3.11 Participant Validation

Key findings beginning to emerge and crystallise from the data were reported to the Head teacher in the first instance, then to pre-school setting staff members at the focus group meeting, and to the participant families individually. The staff focus group meeting took place at the beginning of May half term. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss initial tentative findings, to review staff member thoughts on how they would like to respond, for example whether they wanted to develop the writing environment for the children, including pedagogic approaches (see Appendix 4). The focus group meeting was also used as the appropriate time to announce and explain the researcher's withdrawal from the field, having discussed this with the Head teacher first. Following the focus group meeting both staff members and the Head teacher felt that the research findings were sufficiently significant to expedite changes to writing practice which needed to be shared across the wider Early Years Centre. The early years pre-school setting worked closely with the nursery and the structure of the Centre admissions policy meant that a high proportion of their children were offered places in the nursery to move on to once they were old enough. Two months later, once the early years pre-school setting staff members had had time to assimilate and begin to act on the findings, they were rolled out to members of the wider Early Years Centre at a staff meeting led by the researcher, and including a Power point presentation. Staff members from the Centre attended this meeting, which enabled discussion of the changes the pre-school setting team had made to writing practice. Phase 5 of Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic data analysis had finished by this point. Examples of the children's writing highlighting conceptualisations and including excerpts of dialogue were used to augment the presentation.

Following dissemination of findings amongst the wider Early Years Centre staff team, two parent workshops were organised during the first term of the following academic year (2015-16), which were led by the researcher and the Centre's Literacy Coordinator (see Figure 3.2 showing the opening slide which introduced the research project to parents). Key findings from the research were shared with new parents. The workshop facilitated the sharing of approaches to supporting writing development within the early years pre-school setting and the Centre as a whole, using examples of children's writing from the project itself, and across the wider Centre. Over one third of all Centre parents attended the workshops, which were positively reviewed. The researcher worked with the Centre's Literacy Coordinator to develop a leaflet that could be used with parents called 'Supporting Children's Writing at Home' (see Appendix 5). The leaflet was developed to support the parent workshops and outlined characteristics of children's early writing from the age of two years' old, and suggestions on how parents could support their child's writing development. The researcher had also produced a new resource called 'Reading into Writing' which the early years pre-school setting had begun to trial at the time of the workshops. This resource included five children's books, each in separate plastic wallets with an accompanying laminated sheet. The sheet summarised the book's content, its link to children's writing development, and a potential writing activity to engage in at home (See Figure 3.3). An expanded example of one of the Reading into

Writing books can be found in Appendix 6). The books chosen built on key findings from the study, each one aligning with a specific stage or characteristic of writing development observed amongst the participant children.

A research project

- **Co-constructing Writing Pedagogy with Two-and-Three-year-old Children**
- Petrick-Steward (2012, p.ix) "The children are not merely *pretending* to write; they are genuinely authors, in control of the text worlds they create, first with spoken language and pictures, and later with the written word."

Figure 3.2 Introducing the Research Project to Parents



Figure 3.3 Reading into Writing Books

3.12 The Influence of the Researcher and Participant Observation

An ongoing interpretive role of the researcher is prominent in any qualitative case study (Stake, 1995). I would argue that one of the advantages for the research of the qualitative case study approach undertaken was the type of close collaboration that was established between myself, the researcher, and the participants. For example, through close collaboration the participants involved were able to tell their stories through which their views of reality could be heard (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). The original intention had been to become a participant observer within the setting ahead of the fieldwork period of the research project. As Yin (1981) suggests, participant observation is a well-documented means of collecting data in case study research. It is sometimes undertaken by adults trying to discover what the world is like from a child's perspective for example (Simpson and Tuson, 1995, Cremin and Slatter, 2004, Drury, 2006). Buchbinder et al., (2006, p.48) argue that participant observation "hinges on the notion that to understand human action, we must use a methodological approach that gives access to the rich, social meanings that guide behaviour", a key aim of the research project in relation to understanding writing discourse. Merriam (1988) argued further that participant observation enables a first-hand account of the situation under study and, combined with additional methods of data collection such as interviewing and document analysis, allows for a more holistic or deeper interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated. Essentially, the participant observer must embrace the environment within which the research takes place in order to fully understand the actions and interactions that occur within it, the idea being that their relative position can reveal a new perspective, a hidden meaning, or a unique understanding that is not otherwise achievable by an outsider (Labaree, 2002, p.102). Labaree (2002) further argued that there are four broad values resulting from the experience of such 'insider-ness'; the value of shared experiences, the value of greater access, the value of cultural interpretation, and the value of deeper understanding and clarity of thought for the qualitative researcher in studying the phenomenon under investigation.

Because participant observation allows for a more intimate rapport with those being researched and a more intimate understanding of the setting where the research is taking place, it is argued that the researcher must adopt a reflexive analysis of their role within it (Buchbinder et al., 2006). The researcher did adopt a reflexive analysis of her role within the research, realising early on in the data collection period that it was not possible to participate fully in the life of the setting (as opposed to fully immersing herself within it for example, thus also excluding ethnography as an alternative research design). Whilst remaining 'detached' in this way proved challenging at times, regular conversations with the Head Teacher who acted as a critical friend throughout the duration of the research project helped dilemmas surrounding understandings of participation to be unpacked and reoriented the researcher's position as researcher within the setting; the researcher's overall stance was therefore a preference to locate herself as working alongside the setting rather than engaging in constant participation within it. At the same time, Bogden and Biklen (1992) argue that qualitative studies are not "impressionistic essays made after a quick visit to a setting or after some conversations with a few participants" (p.46). The qualitative researcher needs to spend time in a setting to understand and gather data on the true nature of the case in question. Sufficient time needed to be

spent in the setting with all participants with the intention of building successful, viable relationships at least and to ensure data collection was rigorous and robust. One day a week over a consecutive five-month period was spent directly in situ observing the children, and through this involvement the researcher was able to gain an overview of pedagogical perspectives and approaches in relation to the children's writing practices, as well as gaining clear insights to the children's engagement with writing. The extent of the researcher's involvement proved to be a constant dilemma however and involved ongoing navigation of the 'tricky' terrain of the researcher/participant observer role. Four clear strands relating to stakeholder perceptions of the researcher underpinned the dilemmas regarding the researcher's role emerged during the data collection period and led to the decision that it was impossible to be classed as a full participant observer within the setting. These were: first, the perceptions of the pre-school setting staff members of the role of the researcher; second, the perceptions of the wider Centre staff members of the role of the researcher; third, the children's perceptions of the role of the researcher; and fourth, the perceptions of parents of the researcher in the role of expert. Each of these strands is outlined and explored below.

Strand 1: The Perceptions of the Pre-school Setting Members of the Role of the Researcher

Whilst the researcher was welcomed into the setting, there were certain staff roles that she either could not or was not expected to take on. She could not be left alone supervising children in the same way that staff members could, for example when the garden was open and one or two children wished to remain indoors (on one occasion however she did assume this role due to an incident of staff sickness). Neither could the researcher change a child's wet clothes or nappy. She could not toilet children. She was not expected to intervene when behavioural incidents occurred and she was excluded from weekly planning meetings even though these took place during lunchtime on her regular observation day. Paradoxically one incident occurred relating to the weekly observations that the researcher made which all staff members were aware were being systematically recorded in her Research Journal. In line with setting practice, each of the nine participant children were allocated a key person who was responsible for documenting a child's progress in their Learning Journey. In the spirit of openness and transparency, some of the typed up initial observations were sent to the Room Leader. Robson (2011) argues that this is not uncommon when adopting a participatory approach to research, however some of the observations then appeared in the participant children's Learning Journeys verbatim as if they had been written by the child's key person. One member of staff then developed an activity to build on what the researcher had observed, ostensibly to extend the child's learning. The dilemma this highlighted was framed in the following questions which demanded answers: was it appropriate to offer observations that formed part of a data set and for them to be used in this way? How accurate were the researcher's observations? How well did the researcher know the children? Was using the researcher's observations in this way ethical practice? It was decided that the initial shared observations served to give staff members an idea of the kind of statements that were being written down about the children to allay any fears that their own practice might be under scrutiny. Observations were

subsequently only shared verbally with staff members, and only if there was an opportunity to do so.

A confused perception of the researcher's presence in the setting occurred when she was asked to fulfil the role of staff member with regard to the sharing of information with parents. The following example was recorded in the Research Journal:

This morning I spent some time with [child] in the setting. He was not one of the participant children, however his key person was on PPA. I had noticed that he needed support whenever he attended the setting; he did not have any friends amongst the other children and always relied on an adult to engage in the activities on offer. When he was picked up by his mother at the end of the session she asked for a report on what he had done that morning. Because I had spent time with him on this particular morning and his key worker had been on PPA, I was asked to report back to the parent. I felt distinctly uncomfortable doing this.

This led to a renewal of the researcher's dilemma of participant versus non-participant observer (participant observer/researcher? Researcher/participant observer?). After this incident occurred, the researcher removed herself from the setting into an adjoining office as children were picked up by their parents and carers to allow the staff members to fulfil this role.

Strand 2: The Perceptions of the Wider Staff Team of the Role of the Researcher

Access the pre-school setting was gained through the main entrance of the wider Centre, past the office. One day early on in the research, the following example relating to this second strand was recorded in the Research Journal:

When I arrived this morning I signed in at the office and put on my visitor's badge as usual. The receptionist asked me whether I was going straight down to the setting. When I replied yes I was given some inserts for a leaflet that I had not seen or knew about that apparently needed to go home with the children today. I was asked to take these down to the setting with me. I also was tasked with giving a message to the Room Leader that one of the children would not be in that morning.

What would normally have happened is that the receptionist would have walked down to the setting herself to explain about the leaflet inserts herself, however familiarity with myself as an individual led to the offloading of this job. She would also have relayed the message about the absent child at the same time, or alternatively rung down to the setting using the internal phone system. Clearly in this incident, the researcher, who was not a member of staff, had been treated like one. It led to some embarrassment in the setting as the Room Leader did not expect information such as this to be relayed by the researcher. When I handed the leaflet inserts to her, I asked, "Does this make sense?" It did, but again, it felt uncomfortable. In the mind of both parties the wrong person was conveying key information.

Strand 3: The Children's Perceptions of the Role of the Researcher

The children accepted the presence of the researcher in the setting; indeed, some looked forward to her being there each week. Her interaction was not only with the participant children, but rather all the children. To this end the researcher would engage in activities with them and support them when it was appropriate to do so, for example if asked to read a story. She would also go outside to carry on with her observations, but also to be involved in the play and activity that took place. On one occasion everyone had been outside, but due to a staff shortage that day, the children had all had to come back inside together for snack. Francesca, who was never interested in food, wanted to go back outside again but the garden was shut:

Francesca: I want to go outside with you.

Researcher: I can't take you outside, you will need to ask Antonella or Alice.

Francesca: But you were outside before.

It was difficult to explain the researcher's restricted powers to a three-year-old child who had made an astute and accurate observation of her behaviour.

Strand 4: Parents' Perceptions of the Researcher's Role

Whilst in the field, the researcher's previous experience of having taught in the Children's Centre had raised an acute awareness in her mind of the perception of her status as 'expert' by many parents; parents of the children she had taught had often come to her for advice on what to do regarding certain issues they faced in relation to their children, for example. This was always an experience that she found humbling, but also one of responsibility that had to be undertaken with due consideration and clarity of thought. The researcher has been a teacher educator for twenty years. Like many teachers, she entered the teaching profession because of a fundamental desire to make a difference to children's lives. It was therefore important that the children were given a voice through discovery of their perceptions in relation to writing. Similarly, would parents and practitioners feel the research was helpful or useful? Would it challenge ways of thinking for the so-called 'better'? Possible resistance to change, should change be advantageous, was an area that had to be addressed. The research journal provided the space for reflection and unravelling of issues; both pre-empted and those that emerged.

The researcher got to know the parents as the research progressed, and vice versa. The children began to talk about her at home and parents were naturally curious to meet her having given signed consent to participate. During the parent interviews seven out of nine of the parents asked for advice or information regarding the progress their child was making in the setting when they were asked whether there was any part of the interview they would like further explanation on. This did not always relate to writing development; one parent asked for advice regarding their child's language development because they had been informed by a health visitor that their child's speech "was not as it should be". Another parent asked for advice regarding an older sibling's behaviour as it was (in the parent's mind) so drastically different from that of the participant child's. Information such as this caused a

dilemma for the researcher in relation to her role because such dialogue was outside the direct remit of the parent interview, yet recorded as part of it. Issues raised by parents were shared in confidence and therefore could not be (and were not) passed on to staff members, leaving the researcher ethically challenged. It also placed the researcher in the role of assumed expert, again leaving her ethically challenged, as such exchanges had the potential to undermine the role of the staff members within the setting. After the parent interviews had taken place, parents actively sought out the researcher on observation days. Whilst this proved useful, for example in terms of hearing about additional writing events or approaches to supporting writing development that might be going on at home in the light of new understandings, the researcher's strategy of retreating to the office as the children were picked up at the end of sessions helped reinforce the role of their child's key person in communications.

Stake (1995) has argued that the on-going interpretive role of the researcher is prominent in qualitative case study, in that the subjective status of their position and therefore impact, not only on the recording of data and the subsequent reporting of the findings, must continually be acknowledged. Greenbank (2003, p.798) additionally argues that "research methods cannot be value-free in their application because [a researcher's] values will always impact upon research". A theme that emerged from the undertaking of the research therefore was that of the Influence of the Researcher. The Head teacher for example stated that the very presence of the researcher always writing in the setting and showing an interest in the writing that the children were doing meant that they deliberately wrote for her (perhaps another interpretation is that they sometimes wrote alongside her [include example from research journal]). There were however some half day sessions, usually afternoons, when the researcher did not observe any writing at all; four of the participant children who stayed in the setting all day would become tired in the afternoon and take their play and learning choices in other directions, for example sitting quietly with books, or preferring to spend time outdoors. One afternoon the entire cohort went to the local park. What the researcher was able to observe on these occasions however were examples of skills development amongst the participant children.

Another reflexive consideration is the Hawthorne effect (see Allen and Davis, 2011), where participants may respond differently than they normally would, because they know they are part of a research project. The Head Teacher commented on the increase in interest amongst the children in writing in the pre-school setting during the fieldwork period. It was felt that the researcher's specific interest in writing was picked up by the children and to some extent the Head Teacher argued that they could therefore be seen as writing for me, thinking that that is what I wanted to see when I came into the setting each week. It could also account for a reluctance to write amongst some of the participant children however, for example in relation to the two children who chose not to write at all during the fieldwork period. The research design did not include the creation of specific writing activities on the part of the researcher however, but rather relied on naturalistic observation where instances of writing, when they occurred, were recorded; the participant children were never asked to write by myself. Neither did it rely on the creation of specific writing activities on the part of staff members when the researcher was present within the setting.

3.13 Ethics: Participation and Voice amongst Two-and-Three-Year-Old Children

The research design, in line with the flexibility afforded through adopting a case study approach, needed to respond to challenges presented by the research questions, and particularly the young age range of the participant children. Ethical considerations additionally concerned matters of the individual pre-school setting, child confidentiality, and informed consent for both adult and child participants. The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) guidelines were followed with regard to these. Because of the young age of the children involved, initially parents were asked to give consent to participation for themselves and their child in the study as a legal safeguard (Alderson, 2009). This included agreeing to their child being observed for one day a week throughout the data collection period in the setting, agreeing to the researcher having access to the child's Learning Journey, and agreeing to participate in an audio recorded interview with the researcher. Anonymity was guaranteed to participant families involved who all had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. One family exercised this right early on in the study due to prolonged periods of term-time absence abroad during the data collection period. A further consideration was that whilst it is common practice to use pseudonyms to conceal the identity of research participants to avoid individuals being identified (Wiles, Charles, Crow and Heath, 2006), a specific problem arose when approaching writing up the dissertation and potential publication of the results. One of the methods of data collection was the use of writing samples that the participant children produced. Some of the children were attempting to write, or were writing, their name on the samples used to support the findings, particularly by the end of the data collection period. In order to maximise the impact of the research and its findings, permission was therefore sought to use two of the participant children's first name in the writing up of the research. These two parents were therefore invited to read relevant sections of this dissertation to agree the final content in collaboration with the researcher, where their children's names were involved. Additionally, where children were using letters in relation to their names, the researcher used pseudonyms that followed similar syntactic patterns in terms of features such as beginning and end letter sounds and number of syllables. The children's ethnicity was also taken into account when choosing pseudonyms, so respecting identity and cultural background. In addition, the following areas were considered from an ethical perspective: the establishment of trust with all stakeholders involved; the setting (both as a whole and with individual members of staff), parents, and their children. There was a particular need on the part of the researcher to understand the various contexts in which participant families lived and how to manage potentially sensitive information. Four of the children were part of the current government's 'Funded-Twos' initiative, for example, however the research project was not a comparison of writing ability across socio-economic status. The Funded-Twos initiative has been mentioned in this dissertation in the context of understanding why a focus on two-year-olds and their education is part of current education discourse within England to locate the worthwhile nature of the research project in terms of potential pedagogical impact.

Ethical changes to the language of research where children are no longer described as subjects, which encompasses the notion having research ‘done’ to or on them, but are rather participants, which encompasses the notion of rights, have supported such a shift in thinking. This has taken time however. Haas Dyson’s (1983) paper on her study investigating the role of language in early writing behaviour juxtaposed inconsistent descriptions of children as both participant and subject in the context of her own and other cited research for example; despite an underpinning desire of the research to fundamentally understand children’s perspectives. Brostrom (2012, p.259) argues that the term ‘children as participants’ now refers to a general view where they are “viewed as active members of their own culture and society, with the both the right and capacity to influence their own lives”. The notion of rights is central to current thinking. Alderson (2009) points out that children’s rights in research are now grounded in national laws and other international human right treaties such as the UNCRC (1989) as well as agreed research ethics guidelines. It is important to recognise and understand that children’s experiences are different from those of adults. Including children’s perspectives further acknowledges their right to be heard, and highlights the need for their views and experiences to be taken seriously (Lansdown, 2005). From a global policy perspective, Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) clearly identifies the rights of children to express their views on matters that affect them. Such a discourse argues that children, whatever their age, are experts in their own lives and therefore entirely capable of self-expression (Clarke and Moss, 2001; Lancaster, 2003). An example of where the children’s rights were respected is where the children’s Learning Journeys were looked at together with the participant children; they were always asked first if this was ok and therefore only looked at if the children had given their consent. All of the participant children did agree. The researcher would then ask them to find the book themselves and they would sit alongside the researcher and talked through the content of the Learning Journey which they knew as their ‘Special Book’.

Engaging in research with children enables adults to find out what matters to them and how best to respond (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003), however the concept of participation and voice in early childhood has systematically developed only relatively recently, gathering momentum since the beginning of the 21st century. The current notion of children as reliable commentators on their own lives, whatever their age, is a far cry from Qvortrup’s (1987) observation that in educational research children were often not represented in their own right, but rather through the assumptive perspectives of their family, teacher, or other adult participant deemed able to speak reliably on their behalf. Christensen and James (2000, p.2) argue however such an approach is now challenged by “a perspective which sees children as possessing distinctive cognitive and social developmental characteristics with which researchers, wishing to use child informants, must consider in their research design”. Listening to a child’s voice can present additional methodological challenges (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). The participants of the current study were still developing their language skills and in this respect their self-expression could not be expected to be limited to language ability alone. Palaiologou (2012) argues that babies communicate from their earliest weeks and Hart (1997, p.4) states that “even in infancy, children discover the extent to which their own voices influence the

course of events in their lives.” Despite not yet being fluently conversant in their mother tongue, young children begin to communicate using a range of vocalisations and gestures such as cries or movement such as pointing to something they would like. In this respect, children are already participating in the world around them, in their environment, to make sense of and influence what happens to them. Part of the role of the adult is to listen to the child’s voice, which includes watching their actions, and responding appropriately. Studies can be found that incorporate nonverbal communication as crucial to listening to the child’s voice when undertaking research with them. Flewitt’s (2005) study on making meaning amongst pre-school children developed the inclusion of nonverbal responses from children through body movement, facial expression, and gaze as additional indicators of voice (p.207) for example. Wells Rowe’s (2008a, 2008b) study of two-year-olds writing at a preschool writing centre found that a large portion of the ‘talk’ involved verbal or gestural descriptions of the children’s intentions. This finding was corroborated in the current study as all participant children were indeed able to display conceptualisations of writing through a combination of language and gesture.

In considering research with young children, Alderson (2009, p.238) describes concerns in relation to defining, respecting and promoting “the rights and informed autonomy of participants at every stage of research”. To this end, Birbeck and Drummond (2007) speak of children’s participation rights involving their capability of making and exercising choices. The researcher’s desire to be respectful of choice is encapsulated in Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry’s (2012) concept of consent in relation to very young children, which incorporates two terms, assent and dissent. Dockett et al., (2012) describe assent as a type of agreement that can be obtained from those who cannot give formal participative consent, usually through signing a form. Conversely, dissent relates to ways in which children might indicate their desire not to participate. In relation to young children Dockett et al., (2012) describe examples involving children aged between the age of two and six years old, where assent and dissent involve a combination of verbal, behavioural, and emotional signifiers. Following this line of thinking, there were times throughout the course of the data collection period when the children’s intentions with regard to participation in the research were expressed using both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. In the context of engaging two-and-three-year-old participant children in the study, the researcher had speculated prior to entering the field that this might transpose to notions of assent dissent in the following way; if they did not wish to engage with the researcher when she was in the setting they might simply walk by her, perhaps briefly capturing her gaze, en route to another space (a behavioural response). They might carry on being happily engaged in an activity whilst being observed or may ‘request’ the researcher to leave, for example by saying “No” (a verbal response). They might appear uncomfortable at her presence, for example finishing an activity as soon as possible before moving on to another (an emotional response). There were particular moments of consideration in relation to dissent that occurred throughout the period of data collection. The following extract from the research journal reveals what happened with Bryn:

I am not sure Bryn is happy for me to observe him at the moment. He seems to need a staff member to support him during the sessions. He is very quiet and avoids eye contact with me.

In terms of an ethical approach certain interactions with one of the children, Francesca, exemplify some of the tensions inherent in relation to assent and dissent within the research, but also tensions in relation to undertaking research with children of such a young age. These involve issues of trust and power relations. Two incidents were recorded in the research journal and include immediate reflective comments.

Incident 1: Trust between Researcher and Participant

Francesca's mother came up to me when she dropped her off today and told me that Francesca is now counting to ten in Spanish (Francesca's grandmother was Spanish and she was a key figure in Francesca's life. She talked about her a lot in the setting). Francesca spent part of her morning threading buttons onto a lace. She counted them in English and then I suggested she count them in Spanish, which she happily did. She then looked at the beads and told me she had made a beehive. Later in the term a Spanish teacher arrived to spend some time in the setting. During the course of the session, I introduced her to Francesca and said, without thinking, "Francesca knows how to count to 10 in Spanish, don't you Francesca?" From Francesca's response it was clear I had said the wrong thing. Her face dropped and she walked away. I had revealed a piece of personal information to a complete stranger in front of her. Whilst she had been comfortable with me knowing her ability to count in Spanish, and it had been part of the discourse that day during her beading activity, she clearly was not ready to let a relative stranger know this much about her. This incident still troubles me, perhaps because we had built up a relationship of trust together in the setting and I did not want to lose that.

Incident 2: Trust between Adult and Child

Francesca's mother had told me that Francesca was writing her name at home. Francesca was drawing at the writing table with a friend. When she had finished I asked her to write her name on it. I said, "Mummy says you can write your name now." She looked at me – she has a look she gives me that I immediately understand as telling me that I have said the wrong thing. I realise that when incidents like these occur she suddenly loses control of the discourse relating to choice she has made in the setting. Her autonomy is challenged. She did not even attempt to write her name and left the drawing unclaimed. I wonder whether Francesca did not like me knowing the information that her mother had given me about being able to write her name because I had shared information she would have preferred me not to on a previous occasion. Perhaps she was cross with her mother for having told me at all. The researcher did endeavour to ensure respect at all times for the responses the children made, recognising the importance of building trust between herself and the children alongside their acceptance of her presence within the setting, particularly following the above two critical incidents which occurred early on in the research.

Birbeck and Drummond (2007, p.21) state that whilst once there were concerns about children's powers of communication and cognitive abilities restricting children's participation in research, "empirical evidence suggests that if one appropriately engages children in the information-gathering process there is no reason why their perceptions and thoughts should not be regarded as competent". The current research was based on the premise that two-and three-year-old children were able to effectively participate in the study by sharing their conceptualisations of writing, and thus make a valuable contribution. In other words, they were perceived as capable individuals, "competent commentators on their own lives and on their social relations" (Mayall, 2004, p.52). Alderson (2009) argues that numerous reported studies with children have encouraged new respect for, and I would argue understanding of, their views, experiences, and competencies. 21st century studies such as that of Cremin and Slatter (2004) and Flewitt (2005) have successfully argued that it is possible to access the voice of the pre-school child for example. Cremin and Slatter (2004) investigated four-year-old children's preferences in relation to favourite areas of their nursery setting. The main premise of their argument was that children's expressed preferences when accessing activities within the setting could be interpreted as an accurate account of their thoughts and feelings, however to prove the reliability of the children's choices, their preferences were triangulated with those of adult perspectives. For five out of six of the participant case study children involved, adult and child perspectives were the same, thus adding weight to the argument that young children are capable of giving accurate information concerning the experiences of their own lives. Participatory approaches such as Clarke and Moss' (2001) Mosaic approach have additionally provided frameworks for listening to young children where their voice can be heard using multiple, age-appropriate data collection techniques such as photographs of interest that children have taken themselves, thus putting them in a position of control and capable of taking a valued, participatory role.

The research endeavoured to be child-centred, it responded to the language ability of all participant children involved, and it did not place unrealistic expectations on any child to produce writing in the conventional sense, or indeed writing in any form beyond their capability or desire. Neither did it 'force' participants to write; in relation to data generation, writing behaviours and experiences were 'captured' rather than created. When a writing activity was a focus, participant children were only ever observed approaching the activity themselves and choosing to participate through choice rather than being approached and invited to join in. The best interests of the child remained paramount throughout and took priority over the interests of the research. To this end, and in order to fully get to know the participants (the setting, participant staff and families and their children) and to build relationships of shared understanding, the researcher took the first academic term to introduce and immerse herself within the field. The pilot study enabled the researcher to realise that a constructive framework for working together (as part of a shared knowledge-creation process) with all stakeholders involved was possible. In the final instance, subtle changes in the research design did take place to better suit the context and age and stage of the participant children.

Finally, withdrawal from the pre-school setting happened earlier than anticipated and was made on ethical grounds for three main reasons. First, saturation point with

regard to data collection had been reached in that no new data was being collected (Yin, 2014). Second, the researcher felt it was time to leave; because no new data was being collected, the researcher's focus and purpose for being in the setting every week was gone. Findings were already beginning to emerge. Third, a conversation with one of the participant children confirmed that the fieldwork period needed to be drawn to a close:

Anya: What are you called?

Researcher: Helen

Anya: Why do you come?

Researcher: To play with you...Is that ok?

Anya: (Considers a moment) Yes, but what are you *doing* [Anya's emphasis] here?

This short conversation took place five months into the data collection period and for the researcher was the final confirmation that it was time to leave the setting. Anya knew my name; what she was really asking was what my 'real' role was in the setting, revealing that she knew I was not a member of staff. That is why she followed my response up by asking "Why do you come?" My response was a lie. It came out of nowhere because of the challenge of a question I had not been asked by any of the children throughout the entirety of the data collection period. Anya's follow-up revealed that she was not convinced. She emphasised the word 'doing' as she spoke. I told her what I was doing, that I had been looking at the writing of some of the children in the setting, which seemed to satisfy her. I questioned myself however; what was I doing there? I had my data. Anya's questioning is a strong example of Foucault's (1980) notion of power relations, where subtle shifts in power take place within any discourse once the discourse is known. We both understood that the discourse of writing within the pre-school setting had been discovered. It was time to leave and hand back to the staff members and to the children to continue teaching and learning without the presence of the researcher and her purple book.

3.14 Summary

This chapter has documented the rationale for, and complexities of, a qualitative explanatory case study, beginning with the researcher's interpretivist worldview and outlining a logical progression into appropriate methods of data collection. Data analysis has been explained through the adoption of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. Challenges to the research project encountered in the field meant that it was important for the researcher to locate herself therein. This is in line with the argument that qualitative methods emphasise the researcher's role as active participant in a research project (Creswell, 2005). For this research project the researcher (myself) was the key instrument in data collection, and the interpreter of data findings (Stake, 1995). A section on taking a reflexive approach is therefore included to support validity within the overall project. Time has been taken in discussing the challenges of participant observation, and ethical challenges faced when undertaking research with children as young as two years' old. In line with binding case study to a certain time and place, these issues are all, however, intrinsic

to the research project documented in this dissertation. Limitations of the study are discussed in Chapter Five.

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Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter presents the discourse of writing that emerged across the three stakeholder groups involved in the research project, namely the pre-school setting staff members, the parents, and the children. The writing environment of the children's pre-school setting is first explored and staff conceptualisations of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children are revealed. In the same way, the writing environment at home is then explored and parents' conceptualisations of writing amongst their two-and-three-year-old children are revealed. The children's engagement within both the pre-school setting and home writing environment and their own conceptualisations of writing then follows. Findings revealed that whilst a common approach in terms of pedagogical strategies between the pre-school setting and home might have been the ideal for providing the optimum environment for supporting children's developing writing, this was not necessarily the case. Findings also revealed that the children's voice could sometimes be lost or unheard because of adult assumptions in relation to the validity and form of children writing from as young as two years' old. Within the pre-school setting itself there was a greater focus and emphasis on the writing ability of the two oldest three-year-old children, both of whom were perceived to be old enough to be termed beginner writers. To this end the writing produced by some of the children, notably the two-year-olds, was sometimes 'invisible' to the adults around them as a result of underestimating their abilities. Despite this, a strong discourse of writing emerged for the two-year-old children alongside that of their three-year-old peers. A collation of the synergies and tensions in relation to the discourse of writing that emerged across staff members, parents and children forms the final section of the chapter.

4.1 Writing in the Early Years Pre-school Setting

4.1.1 The Writing Environment

The pre-school setting layout included a designated Writing Area, positioned next to the role play area, which consisted of a table at child height with three seats around three of the table sides and an adjacent set of drawers containing sheets of paper. The table provided a focal point for the children to engage in drawing, colouring, and writing events and included a permanent range of felt tipped pens, pencils and colouring crayons in pots which could be accessed at any time throughout the course of a session. The fourth side of the writing table was pushed against a noticeboard. Handwritten laminated words such as "Dear" and "Mummy" and "Daddy" were attached to this using Velcro, along with numbers from 0 to 10.

The pre-school setting adopted a child-led approach interpreted as children being able to explore their own trajectories of learning through following their own interests. There were no opportunities for the children to use technological devices within the pre-school setting such as an iPad or computer, however they regularly observed staff members using iPads to take photographs in both the indoor and outdoor environment, or using them to work on. Despite the children not having

access to the iPads, they were encased in brightly coloured drop proof, shock proof covers with handles designed for children to hold. There was a pencil attached by string to a painting easel which staff and children could use to write names on completed paintings, however this was not mentioned by any of the staff members during their interview as a possible writing resource for the children. Three staff members mentioned pens and/or pencils and paper as the only specific resources available for children to write with within the pre-school setting, however all six felt that writing resources were available for the children to access independently if indeed this was an activity they wished to pursue. There were some differences in opinion in relation to the writing provision in the pre-school setting on the part of the staff team members, for example Janine said:

I mean we have like name cards and things where the writing table is, the drawing table, we've got them there for them if they want to have a go at writing. But I think that's all we have really. There's not too much there I don't think.

In contrast, Bin said:

I think we have lots of opportunity, for example we have a writing table, which there every day we provide different colour pens, pencils, papers, and there's a simple writing stick on the wall, children can go there [to the writing table] any time they like, and help themselves, and also with adults we are writing the same time with them, and encourage them to write more, or interest in writing [sic].

Susan, the room leader, stated:

[There are] lots of opportunities [for writing] ... the pens and the pencils are always out, and they [the children] are free to take them to the craft table, which they do...

The overall writing agenda within the pre-school setting was led by Susan, the room leader. She was the only staff member to talk about the possibilities for children to write in the pre-school setting beyond sitting at the writing table in the Writing Area. Observations corroborated this statement, for example on one occasion a child was observed coming to the writing table to use the felt tipped pens that they knew would be there to decorate the crown they had been making. On another occasion the same child made a collage at the craft table and came to the writing table to find a pen to write her name on what she had created. Susan was also the only staff member who referred to opportunities for writing events to take place as part of the role play theme:

Yeah, we try and incorporate it [writing] into play, you know, for instance sometimes we have the home corner changed into a hospital role play area, and we have clipboards out and they write pretend prescriptions.

One example of writing opportunities available in the role play area was 'Patient Details' forms as part of a vet's surgery. The possible use of resources such as the

patient detail forms was always modelled initially by a staff member through the children's participation in a focus activity before being left for them to access independently.

Writing activities were typically developed around significant calendar events that provided meaningful contexts for obvious writing opportunities. The children made Chinese New Year cards on one occasion with Bin (who spoke Mandarin), where children were able to try Chinese writing for themselves. Easter cards were made during the course of the data collection period, however Kyung, the member of staff leading this activity, wrote 'Happy Easter, Love from [child's name]' on behalf of all the children inside the cards, apart from with one child, the oldest child in the setting, who wrote her full name. One reason for this could have been to speed up the process of 'getting through' all the children in a certain period of time; it could however have also been to do with assumptions about the children's writing ability in the pre-school setting. I suggest this because one planned writing activity which was led by Susan involved some of the children writing letters home. Significantly only the older children in the pre-school setting (those above the age of three years old) were invited to participate. This was not an observed activity by myself, the researcher, however a display had been created within the setting of all the letters which showed those children who had participated in the activity. It should be highlighted at this point however that this pedagogical approach should also be considered within the context of a committed staff team dedicated to providing what they understood to be age-appropriate practice. When writing activities such as these took place the children's outcomes were always celebrated through being incorporated into displays in the pre-school setting.

The writing environment included the children observing adults writing both indoors and, on occasion, outdoors. Staff members would regularly undertake hand written observations for evidence or assessment purposes or fill in an official accident form as standard procedure for an injured child, for example. A parent would be asked to sign the accident form to say that their child's accident had been discussed with a member of staff. This type of discussion often took place with the child present. Parents additionally signed their children in and out of the pre-school setting against a register upon arrival and departure. Writing resources did not initially extend to the outdoor area, however part way through the data collection period a large whiteboard was purchased and mounted on a wall at child height outside. The children were able to access this independently when in the outdoor area, but only on days when large whiteboard pens were provided for them to use (Figure 4.1).

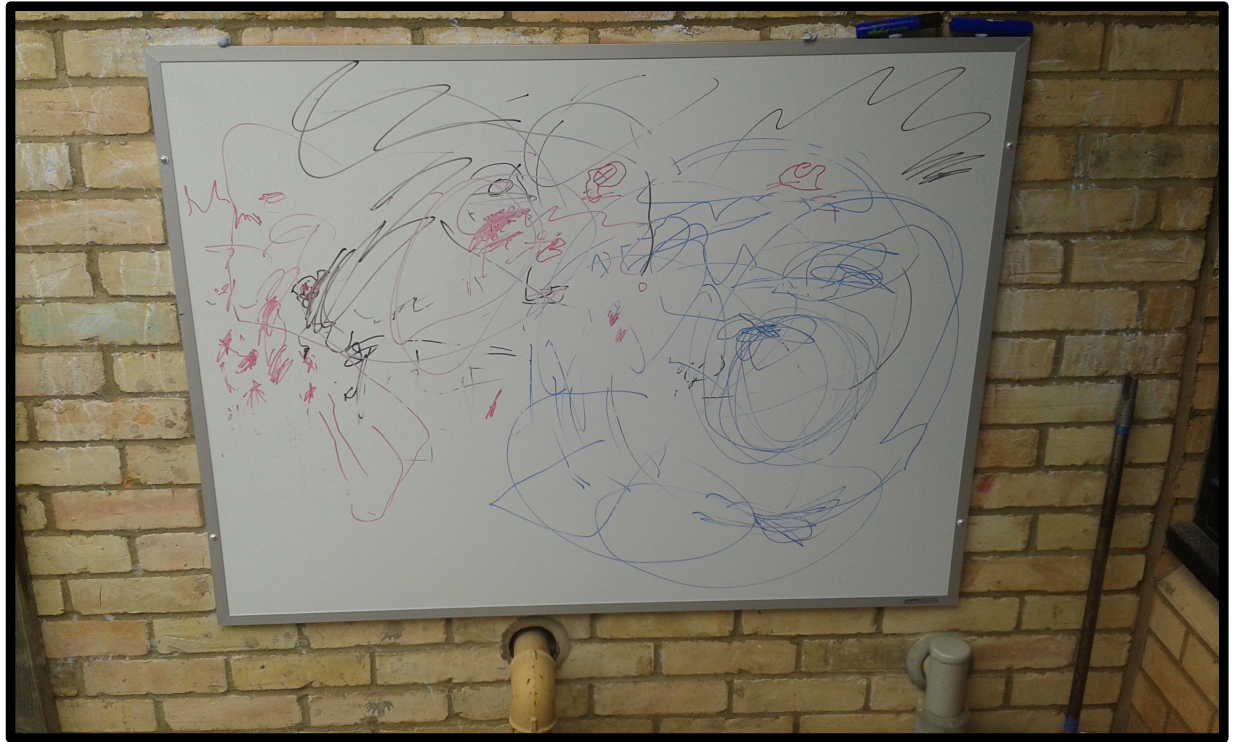


Figure 4.1 Space to write outdoors

Finally, the writing environment included many opportunities to support children's skills development. The significance of children engaging in such activities was perceived as important by all six staff members to build up gross and fine motor skills, however they were not mentioned specifically by anyone as a developmental resource to support eventual writing with the exception of one member of staff, Janine, who explained the importance of children developing necessary fine motor skills in order to be able to hold any writing implement using "an effective, comfortable grip". Children were welcome to access many skills development resources independently, in line with the pre-school setting's child-led ethos and engagement with these was observed regularly throughout the data collection period. The following examples drawn from field notes give a range of the kind of activities available to the children: using a Sellotape dispenser; decorating a crown with sequins using a pincer grip to select one sequin at a time; pressing keys on a toy piano to make music coordinating both hands; doing (and undoing) jigsaws; filling a bucket with sand using a small spade; and threading beads onto a pipe cleaner. Staff members could see the relevance of such activities in relation to the children's young age and stage of development. In summary, providing activities to support the development of gross and fine motor skills was therefore perceived as important, age-appropriate practice despite not necessarily being perceived as the beginnings of a developmental writing process.

4.1.2 Conceptualising Writing

A perception by all six staff members was of children's writing needing to be formed of conventional text before it could truly be called writing. A key interview question

proved to be, ‘Would you describe any of the children as someone who can write?’ The hesitancy and sometimes cautious rationalisation of staff responses is reported verbatim in Table 4.1, with the word ‘pause’ and commas indicating where staff took time to think. These hesitancies seemed to be indicative of some uncertainty about how they could and should conceptualise young children’s writing.

Table 4.1. Staff Responses to the Question, ‘Would you describe any of the children as someone who can write?’

Staff Member	Response to the Question ‘Would you describe any of the children as someone who can write?’
Carina	Er, she doesn’t write her full name, but she writes three letters, so to me she understands, um, you know (pause)...how to use the pencil, um, and you know (pause)... move her wrist, and recognise letters. (Pause). So it’s a matter of time and she will have her full name, probably. (Pause). So I think yes (pause)... I can say yes, she is writing.
Bin	Um (pause)... yes, uh (pause)...quite a few children pop in my head.
Kyung	Yeah, we have specifically only two children who write down the letter things. Amazing.
Janine	Um (pause)... a couple I would say, I think, are capable of doing it.
Susan	Um (pause)... some of them are beginning to, yes, yes, and a lot of them, more and more they are starting to point out letters in the environment.
Alice	Now who’s writing? Gosh, I remember someone did some lovely writing, I remember pointing it out to you but I can’t remember who it was. Uh (pause)... sorry (pause...) who was that person? I don’t think it was [name of child], I think it might have been [name of child] actually, a few weeks ago, I think it was [name of child] I’m sure.

Staff member responses showed that writing was equated with the ability to reproduce letters in the conventional sense. This perception impacted on pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting, for example concerns were expressed by five of the six staff members that through encouraging or talking about writing children might be being pushed into something they were not yet ready to do. Instead, it was felt that offering activities within the pre-school setting to develop children’s fine motor skills in order to support writing once the children moved into their nursery classrooms when they were slightly older was more appropriate practice. All six staff members talked about the need for children to be ‘ready’ or interested in writing

before wishing to support or encourage them to write. Carina did acquiesce however that “some children [in the pre-school setting] of course are at the stage where they are interested in writing”. Again, this perception equated to the children’s ability to begin to use conventional letters; for example, a common pedagogical approach in the pre-school setting for those children who were interested in writing was to begin with a focus on their name, where they would be encouraged to find their name card and copy the letters therein from left to right.

Opinions about whether the staff thought they were teaching children to write further reflected the idea of age-appropriate writing practice. These are collated in Table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2. Staff Responses to the Question, ‘Do you think you are teaching the children to write?’

Staff Member	Response to the Question ‘Do you think you are teaching the children to write?’
Carina	I think I can, yes, you know, related to their age, you know, I think I can. I think, um, yeah, but yeah.
Bin	I think so. Because we are following their interest for example, if children are sitting there already starts interest, we will follow it, we will encourage, ask what are you writing, and encourage them do more writing, doing some more interesting things about writing.
Kyung	Yes, we are helping.
Janine	Yeah, I’d like to think I can guide them into, in a way that they can understand. I can try, I mean I do try to see if they can.
Susan	I think, yeah, without actually sitting down and teaching them I think it’s just a matter of, you know, encouraging them, getting their interest going, encouraging them on what they are doing, because you know we’ve got their name cards, and we often encourage them, you know, if they start saying “I want to write my name”, we say, “Why don’t you go and get your name card off the board?”
Alice	In simple ways, I mean I’m not here very much, I don’t know the children that much. I get to know the ones I’ve been with, but when I’m here, I suppose things like when I work, when I’m with them in the writing corner, the little writing area where they have their thing, sometimes I will ask them then if they’d like me to write something and they want to watch me, that’s how I feel that I’m helping them by role model really, encouragement.

Carina emphasised the need for pedagogical approaches “related to [the children’s] age” and Susan was keen to emphasise the inappropriateness of “sitting down and teaching [the children] to write” in a play-based environment. Bin’s response corroborated the pre-school setting ethos of child-led practice and children being ready or interested in writing before any adult intervention should take place. Alice’s response, whilst recognising the potential value of modelling writing for the children, does so from a deficit perspective where the adult is the writer and the child is not. This perspective could be found elsewhere amongst staff members. Janine for example stated that if she wrote up any observations, a couple of children “might come over and ask me what I’m doing”. She said that if a child picked up the pen she had been writing with they might “scribble on the pad, which I let them do.” Her response shows again how she, the adult, perceived herself to be the writer, whereas the child is not. In this example Janine might have showed a greater understanding of the role of modelling writing for children by allowing the child to use the pen she was writing with; however, the child’s efforts were dismissed as scribble as opposed to meaningful attempts to communicate using an emergent writing script.

The challenges for staff in conceptualising writing were also revealed in a lack of consistency across their interviews in the language used to describe children’s early writing behaviour. Table 4.3 shows examples of a range of language used by the team:

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Table 4.3. Terms used by Staff Members to Describe Children's Early Writing Behaviour

Staff Member	Terms used by Staff Members to Describe Children's Early Writing Behaviour [my emphasis added]
Carina	<p>R: What opportunities do you think there are for the children to write in the X?</p> <p>A: In the [pre-school setting], there's lots [of resources for writing], with mark making, we have lots of, you know, colours, crayons, pens available to them [the children] all the time.</p>
Bin	<p>R: Would you describe any of the children that you work with as someone who can write?</p> <p>D: [referring to a specific child] She able do it she just start doing it, yes, in the writing.</p>
Kyung	<p>R: Have you had any specific training relating to the development of reading and writing skills?</p> <p>H: Uh... I do just naturally reading a book with the children, and mark making, you know, do the writing through the mark making with the two year children, so yeah, I think we do every day with the children normally, but you know, not necessarily that this is literacy or something like that, so naturally we do.</p>
Janine	<p>R: And would the children observe you doing any writing here, whilst they are here?</p> <p>N: There has been a couple of children, if I write up any observations on the child I look after a couple might come over and ask me what I'm doing, and when I explain to them they just walk away. Or a child that I have looked after will pick up the pen that I'm writing with, and scribble on the pad, which I let them do.</p>
Susan	<p>R: Do you ever observe the children writing independently in the [pre-school] setting?</p> <p>J: You know, sort of drawing more than actual writing.</p>
Alice	<p>R: But also you make a distinction between emergent writing and conventional writing.</p> <p>Z: Yes, I mean there's quite a lot of it is mark making.</p>

Whilst all six staff members were using language to clearly distinguish between non-conventional and conventional text, the different terms used also revealed a lack of

agreement amongst the team in relation to common terminology used to talk about or describe writing in the pre-school setting. This may have been a contributing factor accounting for differing responses and understanding in relation to perceived writing provision and pedagogical approaches therein. Whilst staff members used particular terms to distinguish for themselves between non-conventional and conventional writing, and to describe early writing behaviour, Carina's conceptions were indicative of how multiple terms could often be used within the same interview to describe the same phenomenon, as follows:

Carina: In the [pre-school setting], there's lots [of resources for writing], with mark making, we have lots of, you know, colours, crayons, pens available to them [the children] all the time. Also when we do mark making that can be, you know, sticking, junk modelling, they always want to go and get a pen, either for, you know, pretend to write, they want us to write the name, so there's a lot of, even with painting, so there's lots of opportunity for them to express, you know, either their creativity, but also, you know, the writing that leads to writing later on, when they write, some children of course are at the stage where they are interested in writing.

Researcher: And do you observe the children writing?

Carina: If you mean scribble, yes.

Although there was evidence of much heterogeneity in relation to conceptualising writing, there were instances of some homogeneity. For example, three members of staff used the term mark making as one way of describing the early writing (emergent) phase. Mark making was not perceived as 'real' writing however, with only one staff member observed responding to children's so-called mark making in the pre-school setting, for example asking them what they had written or what they were writing. To this end, the children's early attempts at writing were not always acknowledged or noticed by staff members, revealing a gap in how provision was both organised and utilised with writing in mind. Paradoxically however, five out of six staff members claimed that they did talk about writing with the children in the pre-school setting, where they always used the verb "to write" during such interactions. The one staff member who did, Janine, said she did not, when in fact she was observed doing so on several occasions. Table 4.4 gives examples of this:

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Table 4.4. Talking about Writing Together (Children and Staff Members)

Staff Member	Example of Talking about Writing Together (Children and Staff Members)
Carina	“[The children] pick up the pencil themselves and they write their name, and I say “I’ll write your name, would you like me to write it?” And they say, “No, I’ll write it””.
Bin	“We do, there’s lots of opportunity for us to talk, not just by the writing table...for example they are painting, and adults try to write their name and by the time we are doing more and children start doing it, because they saw the adult doing it, every time we write a name we say “Look I’m writing a name” and spell their name, so by the time they know it, just because we are saying it, same time we are doing it, so they start to copy it.”
Kyung	“Yes, last time we did have write the letter to mummy and daddy, you know, besides a table there is ‘Dear Daddy’, kind of things, or us writing, so we just show them that’s ‘Dear Daddy’, or ‘Thank You’ kind of things, so I write, I read them, and try and make them write a copy of that name...”
Janine	Researcher: Are you aware of yourself ever talking about writing with the children in the [pre-school] setting? I mean using the language of writing? Janine: No. No, I’m not...if I have I don’t realise that I’ve been doing it, yeah, I’ve not...
Susan	“If they start saying “I want to write my name,” we say, “Why don’t you go and get your name card off the board?”
Alice	“I will ask them then if they’d like me to write something.”

Again, responses across the staff team varied in terms of perceptions of the children and their ability to write as well as pedagogical approaches. Bin, Kyung and Susan talked about encouraging the children to write their names by copying the letters on their name cards. Carina spoke of giving the children a choice with regard to name writing, revealing a ‘can-do’ attitude from some of them, but also a response that was in line with the pre-school setting’s child-led approach. Alice’s response corroborated her deficit perspective of the adult as writer and the child as not.

A final line of enquiry was followed to see what training staff members had received in relation to writing as part of any early years qualification they might have gained. There were two reasons for this. The first was to see whether such training supported their understanding of how two-and-three-year-old children begin to engage with

writing. The second was to investigate the impact of any training on current pedagogical approaches to writing within the pre-school setting. Table 4.5 outlines all six staff member responses.

Table 4.5. Staff Writing Training as part of any Early Years (EY) Qualification

Staff Member	Comments regarding Writing Training as part of any EY Qualification
Carina	<p>“I didn’t have the specific training for this age group.”</p> <p>“My own research...and also by working, I mean the previous years I’ve worked in the Centre here in different classes, so I kind of learn, also working with other teachers, you know, it’s by experience I guess so to speak.”</p>
Bin	<p>“I think the training I took is especially for young children, and also we do have a regular training in our Children’s Centre as well, and how to encourage, or provide opportunity for the children reading and writing.”</p>
Kyung	<p>Researcher: Are you talking about training that you’ve had since you arrived at the X?</p> <p>Kyung: Yes.</p>
Janine	<p>“I would say my own training...Experience with them [the children], with learning through them really.”</p>
Susan	<p>“I have been on training courses but not specifically to do with early reading and writing, but recently I went on a course called Terrific Twos, which was very good, and talked about how children’s sort of movements, you know, even gross motor skills movements, help develop their fine motor skills for writing.”</p>
Alice	<p>“I have to say experience has helped and I just, I’ve learnt things within the settings that I’ve worked in.”</p>

No staff member had received specific literacy training as part of any early years qualification they had undertaken. Three staff members mentioned they had learnt about children’s reading and writing from their experience of working with the age group. Two talked about a Language and Communication training day that all Centre members had participated in in January 2013. Susan, who had a leadership role in the pre-school setting having gained Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS), was the only staff member who had received any specific training relevant to children’s early writing. Of greater significance however is the fact that this was received outside of her EYTS qualification on a CPD course called ‘Terrific Twos’. This finding is significant in helping to explain challenges in relation to conceptualising writing amongst children as young as two and three years old amongst a committed staff

team. Whilst there was an overall perception amongst staff members of supporting children's writing in the pre-school setting as articulated in their interviews, communication amongst the team in this area and with parents was somewhat lacking. A core team of only four out of the six staff members participated in weekly planning meetings when writing activities might be discussed and planned as these took place over a lunchtime when the remaining two were on lunchtime duty with the children, for example. Staff members were never observed talking about children's writing with parents throughout the entirety of the data collection period. This was perhaps largely due to the fact that the staff members pondered the place of writing for children from as young as two years old in contrast to other aspects of learning such as the development of gross and fine motor skills which were perceived as age appropriate and relevant for children's ongoing learning within the pre-school setting.

In summary, a range of resources and experiences in the pre-school setting offered opportunities to for children to write or to develop their writing skills, beginning with those to support skills development. When asked about resources for writing however, staff members did not include activities to support skills development as a specific writing resource, instead describing conventional writing tools such as pens and pencils and paper. Whilst the writing environment in the pre-school setting had the potential to support children's writing from skills development through to the emergent stages and, ultimately, using conventional text, provision emerged as sometimes superficial vis-à-vis an underlying perception of how relevant writing opportunities might be for children as young as two-and-three-years old. This was because of a fundamental perception across the staff team of writing as being formed of conventional text. Further, unless planned writing activities were supported by an adult, staff members were less likely to pick up on children's independent attempts at early writing and the implications of these. A particular concern across the staff team was a feeling that children who were not ready to write might be pushed into doing so; however, this was based on a perception of writing as being formed of conventional text, concerns in relation to an underpinning philosophy of child-led pedagogical approaches within the pre-school setting, and a staff perception of writing as a skill to be taught at a later age. One staff member who was also the room leader was taking the lead in relation to providing writing opportunities for the children beyond the Writing Area into the wider pre-school setting environment. Significantly, her pedagogical understanding was not always shared by the rest of the team, perhaps further highlighting an issue with communication. Also of significance was the fact that no staff member had received specific training in relation to writing as part of any early years qualification they might have gained, thus a lack of understanding was found to be compromising the status of writing within the pre-school setting.

One key example illustrates tensions within the pre-school setting relating to how staff members understood and responded to children's writing. Originally the pre-school setting leader was the only staff member who had stated how significant she felt the role play area to be in providing opportunities for the children to incorporate writing within their play experiences in her interview. This understanding did not extend across the rest of the staff member team however, and significantly the children were never observed by the researcher being observed by any staff member

with a specific writing focus during the data collection period either in the role play area or anywhere else in the pre-school setting. There were writing interactions between staff members and children, however staff members were not aware that such exchanges might be supporting writing development. With regard to the role-play area, the room leader was stating that writing opportunities were available for the children should they wish to involve themselves in these; this was juxtaposed however with an expectation across the staff team that they [the children] were unlikely to be writing. There was therefore no consistent adult response to any writing the children might actually be involved in. The exception to this was where children were encouraged to use their name card to help write their own name independently if they were felt to be sufficiently at a stage where they were capable of doing so. Staff members did not feel equipped to teach writing, nor did they feel it was appropriate due to the age range of the children. Whilst there had been some expectations regarding writing on the part of staff members, these were limited in terms of what children might be achieving, nor were they necessarily rooted in the children's actual knowledge and understanding. The two-year-old children were never invited to participate in adult-led activities with a writing focus, for example.

4.2 Writing at Home

4.2.1 The Writing Environment

Writing events were occurring in all the homes of the participant children. Within the home environment all the children had access to resources that could be used for writing, such as paper, pens, pencils, colouring pencils, and felt tipped pens. Significantly, six out of nine of the parents had not necessarily provided this type of resource to deliberately support their child's writing development. Six out of nine of the parents did however speak of the writing possibilities that certain resources that their children had access to at home might present. Table 4.6 below shows that Vivian, Bryn, Amy, Sofia, Francesca and Myra's parents stated outright that the resources available were for colouring or drawing. This was linked to a perception that writing at home was not a necessary or relevant activity for their children because of their age, in contrast to drawing and colouring events which were. Alyssa, Myra and Anya's parents on the other hand perceived writing as part of their children's normal activity at home. All parents were however offering opportunities for their children to engage with writing should they wish to and they also provided resources related to skills development, for example jigsaws, construction sets such as Duplo and Lego, and playing with dolls and dolls' houses. These resources were not perceived by any of the parents as supportive of skills development; instead they were described as activities that their children enjoyed engaging in when at home. Table 4.6 provides an overview of writing resources available in the children's homes in response to the question "If [name of child] did want to write at home would they know where to find everything that they needed to do that?":

Table 4.6 Writing Resources available in the Children's Homes

Name of Child	Writing Resources available at Home
Alyssa	"She's got a special table in her room, in her bedroom that's got just for sitting and doing drawing and painting, and she's got her pencil case on the table, it's always out, ready, and paper, so yeah, she's got it all there ready to go."
Vivian	"There are always paper and pens around, they do have specific, you know, they've got a box of pens, and there's paper everywhere. So yes, I'm pretty sure she could always find it..."
Francesca	"She's got pens under our coffee table, which are always, always there, pens and paper."
Myra	"She's got pens, and paper... she knows where it is and she'll quite often do that [writing] herself."
Sofia	"She's got like the colours always on the table, and there's always material around, she's got her own book as well, yes, so... There's material all around the house."
John	"Pencils, pens and paper are at his level."
Anyia	"We have a table, a little table down in the kitchen with pencils and paper there, so she can access them easily."
Amy	"Yeah, I've got, you know, pens, colouring pens... and I've got a box in her bedroom because obviously I like to, and I separate each so she knows which thing is, or I'll keep them in the cupboard for her, and she'll come up to me and say, "Mummy, paper and pens.""
Bryn	"Actually they have a basket each, because [participant child's elder sister] doesn't like to share her special crayons with Bryn because he'll tend to break them, so they have a basket each with their colouring and drawing things in, and paper and notebooks and things, so they are in, they've got a playroom, so they are on the side, and yes, they just help themselves to their stickers and colouring things."

All nine children observed their parents, and where they had them, sometimes their siblings, writing. They were also involved in collaborative writing events at home such as writing shopping lists and birthday cards. Amy's mother wrote on a calendar, explaining what she was writing in front of her daughter, and Sofia regularly observed her mother typing on the iPad. Bryn's mother regularly wrote letters:

I write letters, I like writing letters to friends, so I sit down and do that sometimes, when they are doing something crafty-wise, I'll sit down and write a letter or card or things like that.

Anya and her mother wrote letters to her grandmother who lived in Russia. This meant that Anya was beginning to approach writing using English and Russian concurrently. Different patterns of interaction in relation to shopping lists emerged. Alyssa wrote her own alongside her mother, asking for help with spellings and writing items using a conventional script. Anya wrote her own alongside her mother using her emergent English script; and Francesca took it in turns to write items on a list with her mother, she using her emergent script alongside her mother's conventional writing. Additionally, two of the two-year-old children, John and Bryn, regularly observed older siblings writing which led to unprompted written responses on their part. Bryn's mother stated: "He's definitely interested in it [writing] and I think because X's [Bryn's older sister] doing it it means he'll sit down to do it as well". John observed his two older siblings doing homework and his father recounted an example of his son spontaneously creating his own writing event alongside them:

Yesterday the other two were doing their homework, and he was, "I'm going to do my homework", which involved a piece of paper and Sellotape and folding the paper and then a bit of scribbling.

Evidence from the parent interviews suggested that at least two of the children, Alyssa and Anya, wrote independently on a daily basis at home. The difficulty in being precise with this figure was due to the fact that writing independently was a phenomenon that could only be quantified based on the perception the parents had of their child and also how they conceptualised writing.

Findings further revealed that children were engaging in skills development activities through accessing resources at home, for example jigsaws, that had the potential to develop hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. These activities were not necessarily perceived by parents as activities that would support a developmental trajectory into eventual conventional writing however. Skills activities at home included doing jigsaws, making things (craft), drawing, colouring, playing with dolls and tea sets, and playing with construction sets such as Duplo and Lego. Sofia had access to a balloon popping game on the iPad which involved her using her right index finger to pop balloons that appeared on the screen which her mother acknowledged supported developing hand-eye coordination. Finally, in contrast to the pre-school setting, for three of the children, Alyssa, Francesca, and Sofia, the writing environment at home included the use of technology such as iPads and smartphones. Francesca and Sofia enjoyed playing educational games such as using a finger to follow the shapes of letters on the iPad. Francesca's mother described one such game:

Yeah, we've got like an iPad, a Kindle-y type thing, and she does letters on that, it makes a noise as you are doing it right and following it.

In addition to spending time on the iPad, Alyssa already understood the conventions of texting. She knew where the letters were on the phone to type her name, or she would write ‘love A’, sending such messages to her aunt and her grandparents.

4.2.2 Conceptualising Writing

Six of the nine parents felt that writing was something that two-and three-year-old children were generally too young either to participate meaningfully in or to produce anything that could be recognisable or described as writing on paper. For example, John’s father said, “He’s only two”, implying that his son was too young to be writing. The hesitancy that was a feature of nursery staff responses to the question about whether children write was also reflected in parents’ responses. Table 4.7 sets out the parents’ responses to the question, ‘Would you describe your child as someone who can write?’

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Table 4.7 Parent Responses to the Question, ‘Would you describe your child as someone who can write?’

Name of Child	Response to the Question ‘Would you describe your child as someone who can write?’
Alyssa	“Well, I mean I’d say now she’s got more, so much more vocabulary, she’s got more than I would say maybe a year and a half ago. She could do letters, and now she can write words.”
Vivian	“Um (pause)...you asking the question makes me feel like I should say yes, I, because she definitely thinks she can write, or she definitely is writing in, you know, the way that she can now, which having not thought about it before I would have said no, but actually she can definitely write some letters, so thinking about it now I probably would say yes she can write.”
Francesca	“She doesn’t know the correct way of writing letters, she’ll do probably more patterns, maybe an F, or an A, the beginning of the alphabet, but probably not.”
Myra	“Um (pause)...well not in the (pause)...well she can’t write all of the letters of the alphabet and I don’t think she knows any words that have more than one letter in them, and to write that, but she understands the concept and wants...she understands the concept and wants to be able to do it, but hasn’t got there yet.”
Sofia	“I haven’t taught her what writing is about yet.”
John	“I never would have said that without prompting. I’d say he forms shapes with a pencil or pen but I wouldn’t call that writing.”
Anya	“(Pause)...she can hold the pen very well; she can write very well without knowing the letters. It’s the very early stage where she has started to write, and to write nearly. My belief is Anya will be, I think by four, four and a half, she might know some letters and start joining letters.”
Amy	“Uh (pause)...not properly. She hasn’t written any specific words to me, so she’s like, so I wouldn’t say at the moment that she’s at that stage.”
Bryn	“Um (pause)... I wouldn’t say that he can write, because in my mind writing is actually writing the letters, so I wouldn’t describe him as being able to write, but I would describe him as being interested in writing.”

Eight out of nine parents felt that writing must be conventional in order for it to be interpreted as real writing. This included Alyssa's mother who described her daughter as able to write words. The progress she had observed over the past eighteen months began when Alyssa began to reproduce conventional letters; however, this would have been when Alyssa was two. Anya's mother was the exception to this, acknowledging the validity of her daughter's use of an emergent writing script. At the age of two years, Anya could not use conventional letters to express herself in writing, but her mother described this approach as "writing very well without knowing the letters". Conversely, for Myra, Bryn, Amy, Sofia, Francesca and John's parents, 'real' writing was not yet an occurrence; however whilst Myra and Bryn's mothers both felt that their children were interested in writing and understood it as a concept, Sofia's mother perceived writing as a competence to be taught outright. Of the six parents who said that they would not describe their child as someone who could write, two parents, Myra and Bryn's, felt their child could not write but nevertheless described going along with their child's own perceptions that they were actually writing. It is significant that Myra's parent did not feel Myra was someone who could write in contrast to Vivian's parent who felt Vivian was, when both children were at a similar stage of writing development, thus highlighting the impact of a parent's perception of ability, for example in terms of how they might respond to a child's genuine attempts at writing.

Parents were asked whether they thought they were helping their child to write. Responses are collated in Table 4.8:

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Table 4.8. Parent Responses to the Question, ‘Do you think you are helping your child to write?’

Name of Child	Response to the Question ‘Do you think you are helping your child to write?’
Alyssa	“I think it’s just that we’ve never done it for her, like if we’ve got a birthday card to write out, or if I’m doing the shopping, I say to her, “You write it,” and she’ll say, “Well help me,” and I say, “Well I’ll do it on another piece of paper and this is this letter, now you do it.”
Vivian	“Birthday cards we will do together, or thank you letters, things like that she will always want to be involved with.”
Francesca	“Yeah, definitely. I’m probably more actually thinking about it, because as I said before this all started, but I don’t think as much about writing as well as the drawing and the play side of it as much as encouraging to learn so much, it’s kind of learning as playing rather than intentionally putting pen to paper and right, can you write a letter.”
Myra	“I tell her how, I just started with the basic shapes, straight line and a circle, and then everything kind of stems from that, so C is half a circle, so practiced that one quite a bit.”
Sofia	“I’m thinking about it. I’m thinking of starting to teach her to do numbers, so she can get the idea of how to use the pens as well.”
John	“Yeah, encourage it I think.”
Anya	“We try to write letter for the grandma, and shopping list.”
Amy	“Well I’ve done it like earlier, I was helping her to like, and I spelled out the letters, and I was holding her hand, but letting her hold the [pen], and we drew together the word ostrich, so I try to do it like that, and teach, and she watches, and at the moment she’s squiggling.”
Bryn	“X [Bryn’s older sister] does a lot of writing so he tries to copy her sometimes which is good, and he knows about some of the letters, he knows about ‘B’ for Bryn.”

Responses further corroborated the overall perspective amongst the parents of writing as conventional text. This was reflected in the description of specific strategies that they used at home to support their children, suggesting some positive responses to early attempts at writing. Alyssa, Myra, Francesca, and Amy’s parents focused on the accurate reproduction of letters describing strategies such as modelling how to form certain letters and sometimes words that could then be copied, or talking about the actual shape of a letter and finding a way to describe it through a meaningful context such as Myra’s half a circle for ‘C’. Francesca’s mother wrote letters on Francesca’s back for her to guess and had taught her letter

names. Francesca could spell her name, even though she could not write it conventionally. Vivian, Bryn, and Anya's parents focused on learning to write through involvement in writing events at home, using their child's interest in writing as a starting point for participation. Sofia's mother was still thinking about how she could appropriately help her daughter, prompted by her agreement to be involved in the study. The challenges for parents in conceptualising writing were further revealed in a lack of consistency in language used to describe their children's early writing behaviour. Table 4.9 shows examples of a range of language used by the parents:

Table 4.9. Terms used by Parents to Describe their Children's Early Writing Behaviour

Name of Child	Terms used by Parents to Describe their Children's Early Writing Behaviour
Alyssa	"If we've got a birthday card to write out, or if I'm doing the shopping, I say to her, "You write it.""
Vivian	"I have to say I have assumed that even to her there's not a pattern there, so she isn't, it's, she's sort of almost playing at writing. I don't think what she's putting on the paper necessarily means anything to her. I think you probably disagree, I don't know, but I mean definitely the letters, and maybe recently she has been, but it was more before she was sort of playing at writing and telling me that she was writing, and being proud of writing, but I don't really believe that what she scribbled she thought meant anything."
Francesca	"I write shopping lists and she pretends to write a shopping list."
Myra	"She wants to pretend that she is writing."
Sofia	"She does love scribbling."
John	"I'd say he forms shapes with a pencil or pen but I wouldn't call that writing."
Anya	"(Pause)...she can hold the pen very well; she can write very well without knowing the letters. It's the very early stage where she has started to write, and to write nearly. My belief is Anya will be, I think by four, four and a half, she might know some letters and start joining letters."
Amy	"I'll write "To Nanny", and then I'll say, "Would you like to do something on there?" And then she'll just do her little squiggles."
Bryn	"He scribbles but I usually get him to do something in the card, so that kind of thing. He's taken to sitting down and trying to write stuff, and he doesn't really write but he's trying. He makes marks and he thinks he's writing."

All nine parents were using language to clearly distinguish between non-conventional and conventional text. There was no common term used amongst the parents for writing, reflecting perhaps different understandings or interpretations of the emergent writing phase in particular. Parents had however individually adopted specific language personal to them to describe their children's early writing behaviour. Only two of the parents, Alyssa and Anya's, acknowledged or described their children's written output as writing. Five parents, Vivian, Francesca, Myra, Amy and Bryn's, acknowledged that their children understood the concept of writing, commonly using terms such as 'pretending' or 'playing' at writing. Two parents, Sofia and John's, felt their child was not writing at all, describing them as scribbling and forming shapes that were not writing respectively. 'Squiggling' and 'scribbling' further emerged as common descriptive terms across this data set. Squiggling or squiggles were specific terms used by parents to describe attempted written output, whereas scribbling was used as a term to describe output that parents perceived as meaningless but which was nevertheless different from drawing, as in Sofia's case for example. To this end, some of the children's early writing behaviour was not always acknowledged or picked up on as a genuine attempt to communicate meaningfully. One of the most interesting descriptions came from Anya's mother who was the only parent to acknowledge the significance and importance of her daughter's early attempts to write in the context of understanding a developmental trajectory into conventional writing. She additionally described what Anya's writing looked like using technical grammatical terms:

She'll write quite neat, she writes as a sentence and little letters and then underneath another little letters, then underneath another little letters, and she learn a couple of letters in Russian, and then writing them [sic].

Six parents spoke specifically about how they talked about writing with their children at home. Table 4.10 collates the parent responses where parents said they talked about writing together with their children.

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Table 4.10. Talking about Writing Together (Parents and Children)

Name of Child	Talking about Writing Together (Parents and Children)
Alyssa	“So she’s always asking, you know, how do you spell this, and can you write this for me so I can write it on here?”
Vivian	“She tells me that she’s writing. She tells me what she’s written.”
Francesca	Researcher: Would you ever use any language such, “Are you writing?” or “Mummy’s writing?” Francesca’s mother: Yes.
Myra	Researcher: Would you use the language of writing, would you say let’s do some writing, or are you doing some writing? Myra’s mother: We would now, yeah, didn’t before, but she now likes to pretend, she wants to pretend that she is writing.
Anya	“Yes, she likes drawing, she likes drawing also compared to the boy [Anya’s older brother], she likes, I can see she loves drawing, every day probably she will draw something, or she’ll write something.”
Amy	“I don’t always, I should say with her more, but she’ll do it more, say, “What are you writing mummy?””

Responses show that episodes where parents and children talked about writing together were sometimes instigated by the children, for example Alyssa, who was very aware of real writing as composed of conventional text. Amy was showing an interest in what her mother was writing at home, thus demonstrating an understanding of writing as a medium of meaningful communication despite not yet writing conventionally herself. Anya’s mother distinguished the difference between when her daughter was drawing and when she was writing at home. What is significant about the parents’ responses however is that for Myra, Amy, Francesca and to some extent Vivian, despite them using phrases such as, “I am writing” or showing a parent their writing, their parents’ views remained consistent that their child was not really writing. An example of this follows:

Francesca’s mother: I write shopping lists and she pretends to write a shopping list, she just does squiggles but she’ll just pretend.
 Researcher: So she writes with you really when you are doing some tasks.
 Francesca’s mother: Yes, and she’ll say oranges, or bananas, or chocolate biscuits, she’ll pretend to write it.
 Researcher: They go on her list.
 Francesca’s mother: Yes.

Sofia and John’s parents did not talk about writing at home together because it was not seen as relevant in relation to their age and/or stage of development. John’s

father described how his son had a keen interest in drawing however, which he did encourage him in, mentioning that he tried “to get him hold a pencil in a more writing way rather than a gripped way, so if he is gripping it I’ll move it around so he’s holding it correctly”. This perhaps showed an awareness of needing to prepare him for learning to write using a comfortable, appropriate grip. Finally, Bryn’s interest in writing was only observed by his mother, but never discussed with him, corroborating his mother’s perception of him as not really writing despite trying to do so.

All nine parents created a supportive writing environment at home, including the provision of resources to support skills development, particularly hand-eye coordination. In contrast to the pre-school setting, three of the children both observed the use of, and had access to, digital technology at home. Significantly, parents did not necessarily recognise the value of the experiences they were offering in relation to ongoing writing development for their children, linked to a fundamental perception of writing as conventional text. Whilst all parents used a range of terminology to accurately describe either their child’s emergent writing or their child’s approaches to writing, only one parent showed an awareness of the importance of the emergent phase across this data set. Parents’ perception of writing as conventional text also impacted on expectations or assumptions of what their child could or should be achieving at the age of two or three years’ old in relation to writing and its relevance at this stage of the children’s lives. This was reflected in some challenged responses to certain questions during the parent interviews, particularly the question, ‘Would you describe your child as someone who can write?’ Writing events were however occurring for all the children at home involving an element of composition, whether their parents perceived this as writing or not.

4.3 Writing from the Children's Perspective

4.3.1 The Writing Environment

Findings showed that the children had the potential to write both in their pre-school setting and home environments. All nine had access to a varied range of resources across the two, although the children did not have access to electronic devices such as iPads in the pre-school setting. One of the children, Alyssa, sent "I love you" texts to her grandparents using her mother's smartphone. She signed the texts, 'A'. Additionally, the nine participant children were exposed to writing in their everyday lives either within the context of the pre-school setting or home, or both. They saw adults writing for various purposes or reasons in both contexts, and for three of the children, Sofia, John and Bryn, there were older siblings at home whom they observed regularly doing their homework. Sometimes the writing environments of the pre-school setting and home were used in different ways by some of the children. Alyssa for example wrote complete stories at home using a combination of conventional and non-conventional script, but she did not do the same in the pre-school setting. At home she would ask her mother to help her to write, for example with spelling a word or showing her how to form specific letters. She did not ask for this kind of support in the pre-school setting however, but would write her name using conventional letters on her drawings and paintings and models. Three of the children, Francesca, Sofia and Bryn, were not observed writing at all in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. There was sufficient evidence to show that all three understood something about the function and purpose of writing however. Francesca for example knew that it was a good idea to ask an adult to write her name on her paintings to identify them to take home, and could spell her name out loud correctly. Writing events were additionally described by their mothers at home, including educational games which sometimes involved recognising and tracing letters on the iPad for Francesca and Sofia. Bryn wrote alongside his older sister when she did her homework. Observations in the pre-school setting provided additional confirmation in relation to understanding for Bryn who always asked adults to write his name for him on his creative output. Francesca, Sofia and Bryn were regularly observed engaging in activities to support skills development such as doing jigsaws, bead threading, and building with Duplo.

Sometimes occasions were observed when the children's writing went unseen within one or both of the environments, or was unacknowledged by the adults around them. Two of the children, Amy and Anya, were observed engaging in writing events regularly in the pre-school setting throughout the data collection period, for example. Amy, one of the two-year-old children who could read her name, was signing herself in and out against the daily register. She was using an emergent script to do this, however staff members did not comment on or acknowledge her writing and her mother would always write over her attempt. Anya was observed writing a shopping list in line with the pretence play she was engaged in. Her 'baby' was in the pram, and she had chosen a bag into which she had placed a purse with money. She wrote her list on a piece of paper attached to a mini clipboard.

4.3.2 Conceptualising Writing

How the children conceptualised writing was revealed in how they used it across the contexts of their pre-school setting and home. Because some of the children were attempting to write for themselves, it therefore follows that they not only had perceptions of the purpose, form, and function of writing, but that they also had perceptions of themselves as someone who could write or not. Table 4.11 gives an overview of their individual perceptions. The children are listed in age order from the oldest to the youngest. Evidence has been drawn from the researcher's field notes.

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Table 4.11. Children's Perceptions of Themselves as Someone who can Write

Name of Child	Perception of self as someone who can write	Example of Reason for Perception (drawn from field notes)
Alyssa	Yes	"Mummy's showing me how to do my A's".
Vivian	Yes	"Vivian wrote Amy's name for her in the bottom left-hand corner of her painting using a zig-zag emergent script."
Francesca	No	Francesca was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. She did however engage in Skills development activities and would ask for her name to be added to her creative output.
Myra	Yes	"Myra was in the writing area making a card alongside John. I said to her, "What have you written Myra?" "Swirly, swirly. I'm going to write mummy's name," she replied."
Sofia	No	Sofia was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. She did however consistently engage in Skills development activities. NB. Findings for Sofia are tentative in terms of how she was defining and conceptualising writing. Sofia's first language was Spanish and the pre-school setting focus was on developing her ability to communicate in English, for example devising specific one-to-one and small group activities to model and develop vocabulary.
John	Yes	"“And who is this for?” I asked John, indicating the envelope full of cards. “My mummy.” “Can you write mummy's name on here?” I pointed to the sealed envelope and John wrote on the front of it using an emergent script.
Anya	Yes	"Later on in the morning Anya was in the role play area with a mini clipboard, paper and pencil. She told me she was writing a shopping list. Her emergent script showed a list-like form. The creation of the shopping list was in line with the pretence play she was engaged in. Her baby was in

		the pram, and she had a bag with a purse and money ready to go to the shops.”
Amy	Yes	“Amy went to paint. When she finished, she took my pencil from me and wrote her name using an emergent script. “There, done,” she said.”
Bryn	No	Bryn was not observed writing in the pre-school setting throughout the duration of the data collection period. He did however engage in Skills development activities and would ask for his name to be added to his creative output: “Bryn did a painting using a foam roller and then asked me to write his name. Without any prompting he went over to the writing table to find me a pen with which to do this.”

Interestingly, the children’s perceptions of themselves as someone who could write did not necessarily equate with adult perceptions of the same. Both Amy and Myra felt they could write, but staff members and their mothers did not. Similarly, John was engaging in writing events across the pre-school setting and home, but this engagement was not taken seriously in either context as early writing behaviour. Sometimes staff and parent perceptions of individual children were not always the same. Amongst staff members for example, only Alyssa and Vivian were described as children who could write, however Vivian’s mother only acquiesced to saying yes having felt prompted into giving a positive response to the question ‘Would you describe Vivian as someone who can write?’ during her parent interview. Conversely, none of the staff members named Anya as someone who could write, yet her mother clearly described her as being able to do so through using a combination of a few letters that she knew and an emergent script in quite sophisticated ways.

The following specific examples of writing events collated during the fieldwork period of the study provide further evidence of how each of the participant children conceptualised writing. The examples describe how each of the children engaged in writing events in the contexts of the pre-school setting and home. These are drawn from observations undertaken within the setting, and recounted events from the parent interviews, where parents described their child’s early writing behaviour at home. The examples cited also offer glimpses of how the children were thinking about the relevance and purpose of writing in their everyday lives. All the children were aware of how writing looked, whether they asked an adult to write for them or whether they used conventional letters or not. Despite age not being a barrier to writing, the children are listed here in age order from the oldest to the youngest.

Alyssa

Alyssa was clearly engaging with the writing process and conceptualised writing as purposeful. She understood the difference between drawing and writing. In the extract below she revealed how she also understood the concept of dedicating artistic output to someone; she dedicated her drawing to her mother, writing ‘mummy’ on

the piece, before adding her own name which she was able to do independently. In this way she demonstrated the intentionality of what she had written. She adopted the strategy of using a prompt card available within the pre-school setting to make sure she correctly spelled the word 'mummy':

Later, Alyssa was encouraged to do some drawing by a member of staff who then encouraged her to write her name on it. She tried to write 'mummy', copying from the prompt card in the writing area. Then she wrote her name.

Alyssa's writing differed according to the context she was writing in. At the pre-school setting, her writing did not extend much beyond using her name to demonstrate possession of her artistic output, whereas at home writing was integral to her daily activity:

Alyssa's mother: And she also does something quite funny, she's so interested in it that she'll write, and she talks while she's writing, so she's almost like writing a story, so she'll say, I don't know, the little girl was walking through the woods, and she's actually writing while she's doing it, do you know what I mean?

Researcher: Yes.

Alyssa's mother: She's got these stories and she wants to write them down.

Researcher: So if she was writing something like the little girl was walking through the woods would you see, what would you see?

Alyssa's mother: She'd start off with letters, like 'the', she knows the smaller sort of words, so she'd start off with like a T and a H, and then, you know, she might do a little squiggle for a word, do you know what I mean?

The extract shows how Alyssa had developed a sophisticated understanding of narrative written text being built up from individual words along with an early awareness of genre. She was achieving an element of fluency with her writing through not worrying too much about getting every single word down using conventional letters. Both Alyssa and her mother conceptualised writing as a means of communication that Alyssa was capable of engaging in competently.

Vivian

Vivian conceptualised writing as a phenomenon to be read by others. For her, this meant writing conventionally and the extract below shows how she was aware that she was still not getting her name quite right. To this end she had to problem-solve. First she asked an adult for help, and then she applied her understanding of what to write with (as opposed to what to draw with), choosing a blue pen. Perhaps this is because she had seen adults using a blue pen to write with. There is logic in her choice in this respect, because in her mind the blue pen might just have made a difference. She was offered another strategy by an adult, that of using her name card. This worked, and she copied the letters from left to right until she got to the final letter of her name, when she stopped because she did not know how to form the letter 'n'. Vivian showed an awareness, not necessarily yet of correct letter formation, but perhaps of accurate reproduction, in order for her name to be read by others. When she saw the two n's side by side in the researcher's book of field notes, she corrected

the researcher, showing clear understanding of how her name should ‘look’ on the page:

Vivian tried to write her name independently on a model she had made at the Making Things table using a pencil. Then she asked an adult instead, “Can you write my name?” The adult encouraged her to have a go herself. She kept trying.

“Maybe I have to get a different pen,” she said out loud. She came to the writing table and found a blue pen.

“Are you doing some writing, Vivian?” I asked her.

“But I don’t know how to write my name.”

I suggested she found her name card. She returned to the writing table and started to write, copying the letters she saw from left to right.

“But I don’t know how to do that one.” She pointed to the ‘n’ at the end of her name. I modelled writing it for her in my book of field notes, naming the letter and sounding it out. I did this twice, thinking repetition might be useful. Vivian looked closely at my book.

“But I only need one!” she told me (see Figure 4.2).

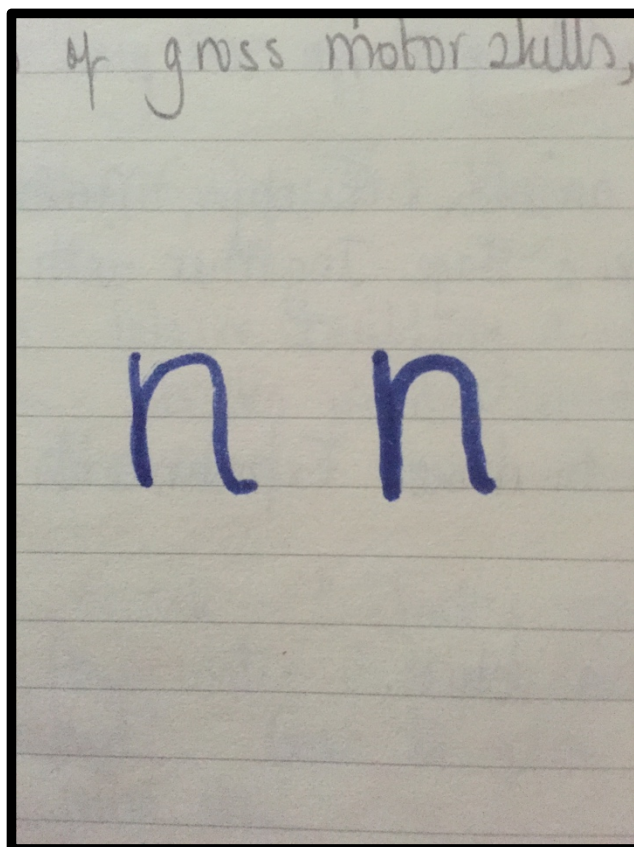


Figure 4.2. Modelling the letter ‘n’ at the end of Vivian’s name

Vivian’s mother described her as spending concentrated periods of time experimenting with writing at home, creating meaning for herself through what she knew and understood:

Researcher: Do you ever observe her [Vivian] writing on her own at home?
Vivian's mother: Yes, yeah, again it's squiggles, or letters that she's recently learnt, but yes she just sort of gets on with it, very busy with little jobs that she does, yeah.

Vivian's mother clearly described purpose in Vivian's writing at home, and perhaps some awareness of form. There was greater alignment between her writing output in the pre-school setting, and at home, and she was clearly experimenting with writing in both environments. Figure 4.3 shows her completed treatment form from a vet's role play area.

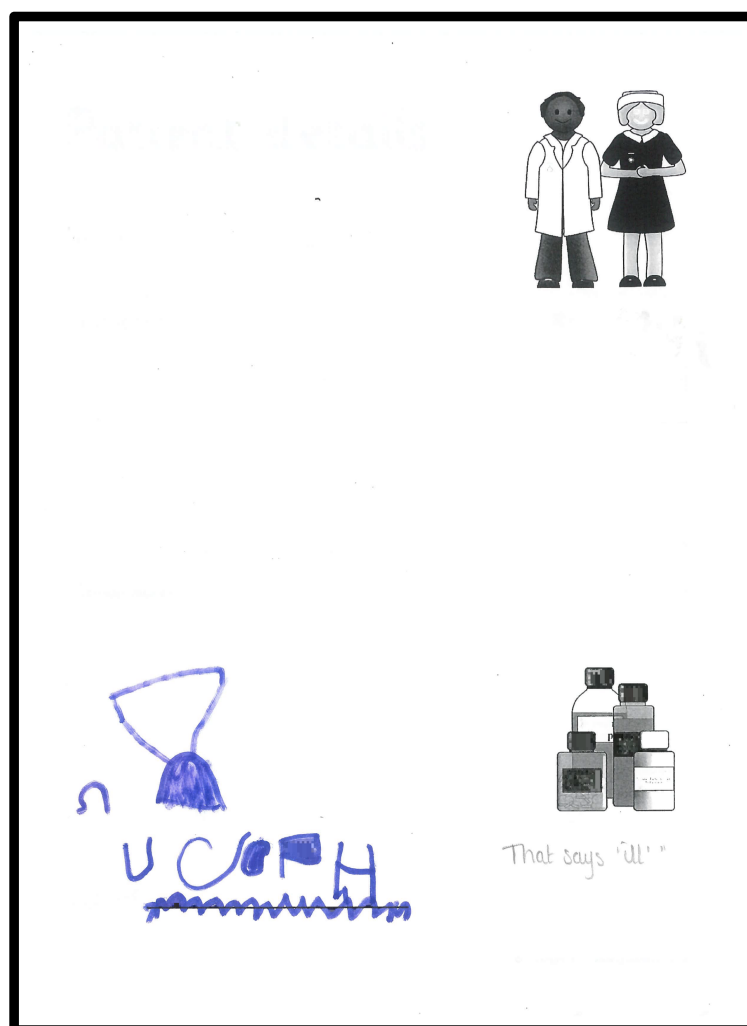


Figure 4.3 Vivian's completed vet's treatment form

Francesca

Observations of Francesca showed that she understood the difference between writing and drawing. In the chosen extract she demonstrated that through handing an adult the pen, she distinguished an appropriate implement to write with. She further demonstrated her understanding that adults can write, as opposed to children who perhaps cannot, perceiving name writing as part of the adult role in the pre-school setting having seen it modelled many times. What is striking about this writing event

however is Francesca's ability to correctly spell her name. She knew the names of the letters but was not yet able to or willing to write them down herself, thus revealing how she was conceptualising writing as conventional text:

Having finished a painting, Francesca asked me [the researcher] to write her name on it. She handed me a red, felt-tipped pen.

"Hmm, Francesca. How am I going to spell that?" I mused out loud.

"F, r, a, n, c, e, s, c, a," she instantly replied. I wrote each letter down as she uttered it (See Figure 4.4).

It made sense that Francesca's mother stated that she was teaching her daughter correct letter formation at home and could already recognise and name the letters in her name. Francesca engaged in activities where she would follow the shape of letters, particularly familiar ones such as 'F' for Francesca, or 'M' for Mummy. She liked to play a game where her mother drew letters on her back and she had to guess them. She also had access to a writing app on the iPad which involved tracing letters. Different noises could be heard in response to whether the letters were being formed correctly or not. The focus on conventional text was consistent within the context of the parent interview where her mother described Francesca as someone who could not write because of the fact that she did not yet know the correct way to form letters. It was clear that Francesca conceptualised writing as a way to convey specific meaning; her perception of writing as conventional text however appeared to impact on her a reluctance to put pen or pencil to paper in the pre-school setting. There is just one example of this, revealed in Figure 4.5, where Francesca shows her understanding of how to fill in a treatment form in the vet's role play area.



Figure 4.4 Francesca spells her name out loud

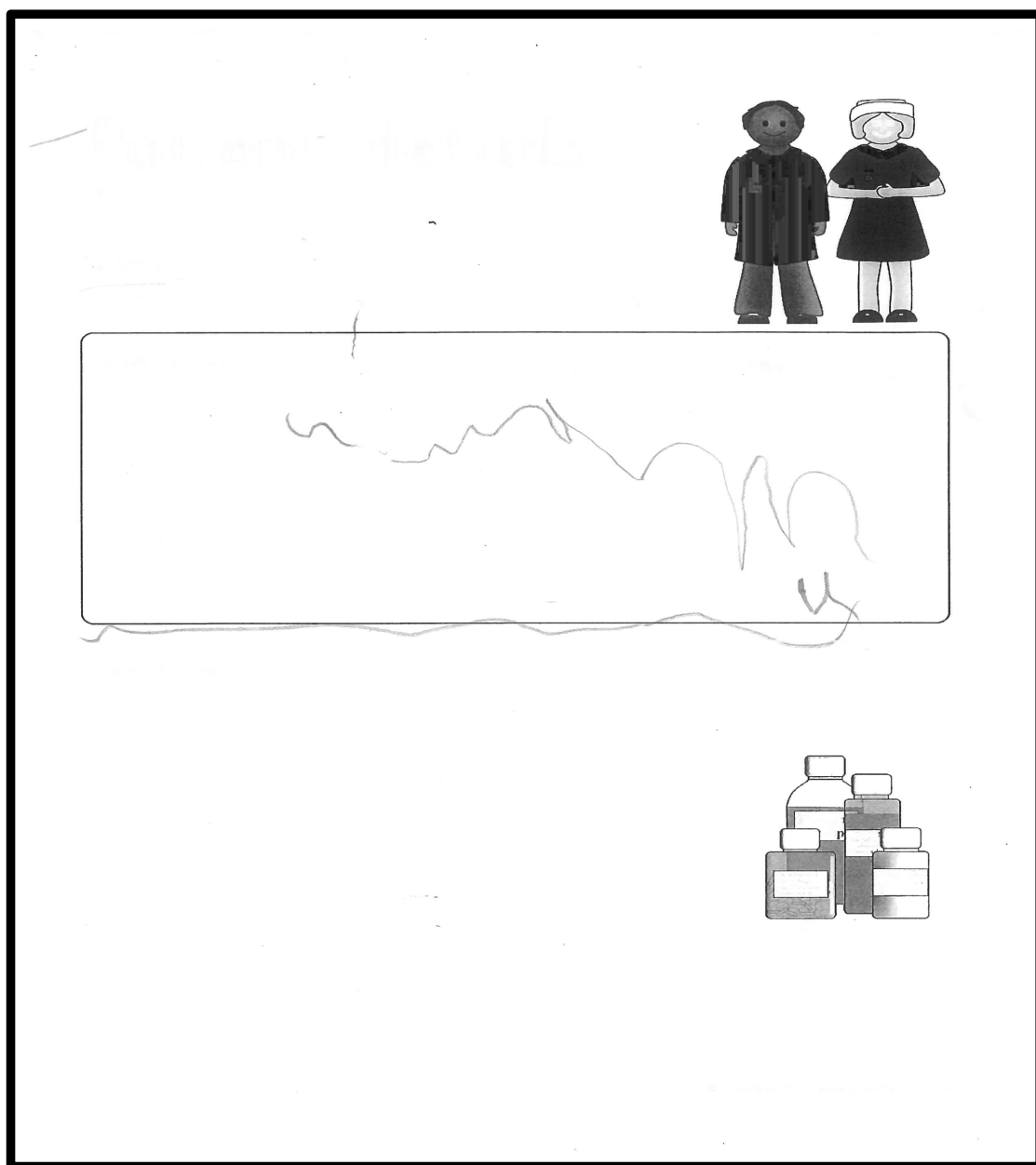


Figure 4.5 Francesca's vet treatment form

Myra

Myra showed a keen interest in genre. She engaged in writing events in the pre-school setting such as filling in a vet's prescription form, for example. She knew the form and purpose of a get well card, that there needed to be a picture on the front and writing inside. In this observed writing event it is clear that she conceptualised writing as speech that could be written down, using an emergent script to record a clear, spoken message. She was adamant that she could write her own name through reproducing the letter 'M'.

When Myra learnt Francesca wouldn't be coming in today, she was encouraged by one of the staff members to make a get well card for her. The staff member found a piece of card and folded it in half, instantly creating a recognisable card.

"I need to decorate it," said Myra and took it to the making table. "Look, this is Francesca's card."

The staff member said, "Why don't you write down inside?" [sic].

Myra took it to the writing table (where the researcher was sitting).

"Dear Francesca," she said out loud as she wrote inside using an emergent script, "from Myra."

"Did you write your name inside so she knows who it's from?" I asked her.

"I can do it," said Myra (see Figure 4.6).

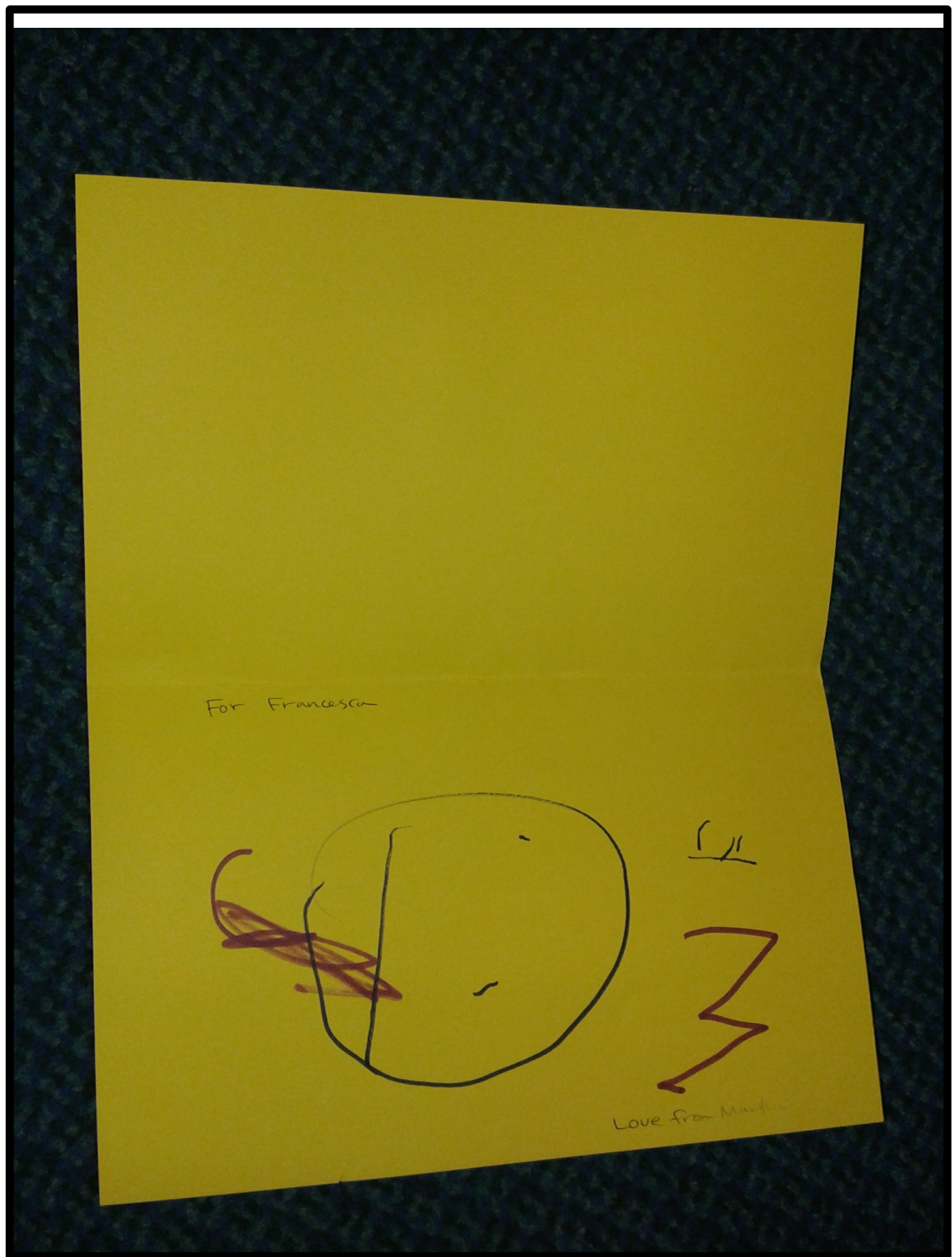


Figure 4.6 Myra's get well card for Francesca

At home, Myra was involved in writing events through which she could develop her understanding of form and purpose. Her mother stated:

"I write the shopping list and make a sort of event out of it, so she sees that, and also writing thank you cards to people, birthday cards."

There was therefore some cohesion between Myra's engagement with writing in the pre-school setting and at home. She was used to writing for a specific purpose as the following example shows when she was role playing being a vet to a poorly dog called Lily.

I asked Myra, "What did you write?"

"Broke his [sic] head. I've got to write this down here."

She also explained where she had written down the medicines the dog would need to get better (Figure 4.7).

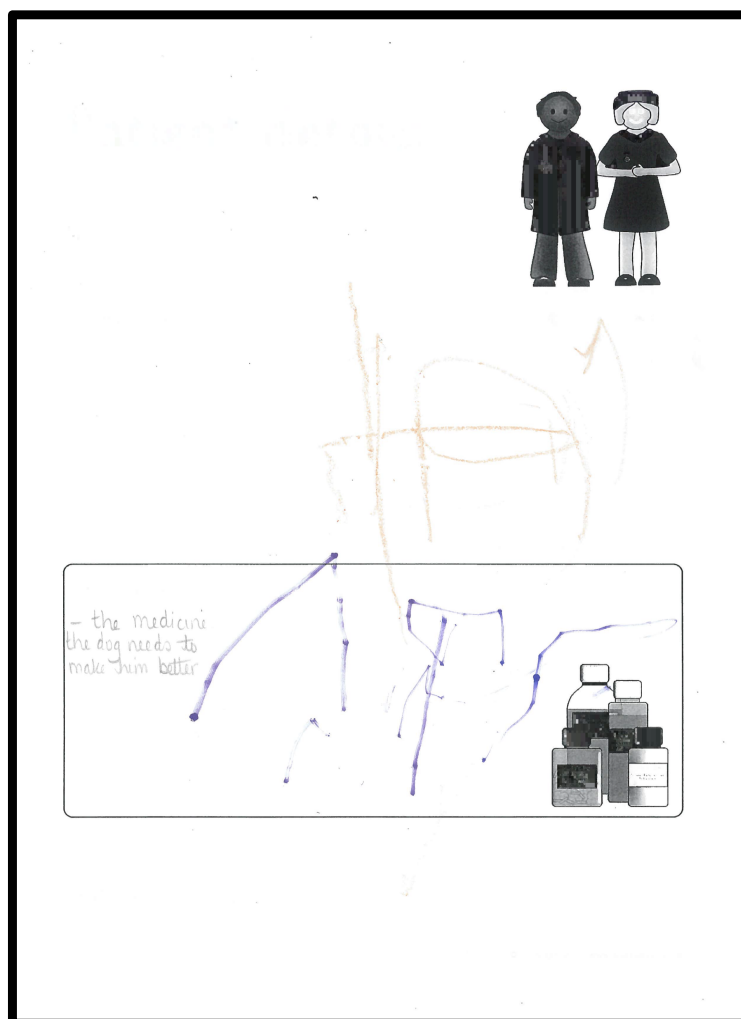


Figure 4.7 Myra's vet treatment form

Myra's patient form prescribing treatment for a poorly dog (Figure 4.7) is one example of writing shared with staff members which eventually led to new understanding, included as the role play example in the pre-school setting's policy statement above. The vet's role play area was not only a good example to share with staff members of the significance of a meaningful writing context, but Myra's writing on the form also showed for example how much she understood about being ill and well and how sometimes medicine is needed in order to recover. Here, Myra

told me what she had written. She used sophisticated language when she explained; “I’ve written the medicines the dog needs to make him better” in the Treatment section of the form. Myra loved dogs and talked about two in particular, Buddy and Holly, who belonged to a family member and with whom she often spent time. Her play in the pre-school setting often included dogs. She knew about my dog at the time, Tillie, and would ask me how she was every week. Sometimes she would draw a picture for her and write a dedication (see Figure 4.8). In this example she told me “I want to write Tillie’s name” [on the drawing], and held her pencil in the air as if making a writing motion.



Figure 4.8 Myra’s drawing with a dedication for Tillie

Sofia

Sofia was only ever observed in relation to skills development in the pre-school setting. Sofia showed an interest in activities that supported the development of her fine motor and hand-eye coordination skills. She liked to dress and undress dolls, for example getting them ready to go out for a walk in the pram. She liked to put things in bags – often there was no obvious reason as to why she had chosen the range of objects that were found in these. She always spent part of each observed session pressing the keys on a toy piano to make music, coordinating both hands and spent time doing jigsaws of her choice. At the end of the parent interview her mother asked the researcher, “Do you think she can write?” The importance of pre-writing activity

was explained to her in the context of the activities that Sofia engaged in, both in the pre-school setting and at home. Her mother stated that in the context of the home environment that “She does love scribbling.” This was the only piece of evidence from all the data gathered on Sofia to suggest that she understood the difference between writing and drawing. She observed her two older siblings doing their homework at home. She was therefore perhaps beginning to conceptualise writing as different from drawing. There was no expectation at home that she might be writing because her mother perceived it as a skill that needed to be taught.

John

The following observation of John showed how he had a clear writing purpose in mind. He wanted to make a card for his mother. He knew what a card looked like and that it was something that could be sent to someone else. He understood that there was usually a picture on the front, a written message to a person inside, and that an envelope was needed to put it in, again with someone’s name on the front to indicate who it was for. Despite not writing conventionally, this writing event showed how he conceptualised writing as a way to communicate meaningfully and purposefully with others:

John came over to the Writing Area. “I’m going to make a card,” he told me. He folded a piece of paper in half; he knew what a card should look like. He wrote inside and drew a picture on the front.

“Who have you written you card to?” I asked him.

“My mummy.”

Then he said, “I need an envelope.” There wasn’t one in [the setting] so we went and got one from the store cupboard. John had a choice of envelopes and chose a large, brown A4 one. When we got back he told me, “I’m going to put lots of cards in here.” This is what he did before telling me, “Lots of cards in there.” He had not made every item in the envelope because he had scooped up other pieces of paper that had been scattered on the writing table. When he could not find any more paper, he sealed the envelope.

“And who is this for?” I asked him, indicating the envelope full of cards.

“My mummy.”

“Can you write mummy’s name on here?” I pointed to the sealed envelope and John used an emergent script to write on the front of it. He held his pencil in his right hand in his fist.

Despite John’s father stating that John did not write at home, he was in fact involved in writing events through which he could conceptualise writing as a means of effective communication through an understanding of form and purpose:

Researcher: And does John ever observe you and his mum writing at home?

John’s father: We rarely do really, apart...well [John’s mother] does, she does shopping lists, and we do birthday cards, always get him to sign his name.

To this end, John’s writing was similar across the contexts of both pre-school setting and home. He was demonstrating and understanding of written form, but this was not necessarily recognised as such in either.

Anya

Anya demonstrated intentionality and a sense of purpose in what she wrote in the pre-school setting. The extract demonstrates that despite not writing her name conventionally, she expected others to be able to read what she had written. She understood that the pen was an appropriate tool to write with, distinguishing it from her paintbrush which had served a different purpose:

Anya was painting and Francesca said to me, “Anya did a picture, then you have to write her name.” She handed me a pen.

Anya: No, I’m not finished yet.

I wait until she has finished.

“Are you going to write your name on that Anya, or shall I?” I asked her.

“I will,” she replied.

She took the pen I was holding and carefully wrote her name in the bottom left hand corner of her painting using an emergent script.

At home, Anya was writing on a daily basis. She had developed an understanding of written text being built up from individual words:

Anya’s mother: She usually speaks when she writes.

Researcher: OK, so she’s saying what she’s writing down.

Anya’s mother: Yes.

Both Anya and her mother conceptualised writing as a phenomenon that she was capable of engaging with meaningfully. She was included in a range of writing activity at home, including writing letters to her grandmother in Russia in Russian, and she also observed her mother doing homework with her older brother who attended a Russian school in the city. Anya was one of the two-year-old participant children who used a signature to lay claim to her drawings, paintings and models (Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9 Anya's signed drawing

Amy

The signed painting (Figure 4.10) and accompanying dialogue below was indicative of Amy's conceptualisation of how writing could be used as a medium for meaningful communication. It also shows what Amy knows about how her name should look when written down. Note that the paint is still wet. Amy only wrote her name when she felt she had finished what she was doing. Repeated observations revealed that at the age of two years she had developed a signature, similar at every written attempt, always appearing in the bottom left hand corner of her paintings for example. It further reflected an understanding of the length of her name, which she could read on her name card. In the extract, Amy revealed her understanding of a pencil as an appropriate tool to write with, distinguishing it from her paintbrush which had served a different purpose.

Amy went to paint. I said to her, "Are you going to write your name?"
 "No," she replied, because she had not finished her painting. When she had, she took my pencil from me and wrote her name. "There, done," she said.



Figure 4.10 An example of Amy's use of her signature

Amy was also signing herself in every day at the pre-school setting as well as signing her paintings and models. This writing was originally unnoticed by adults and her name was initially written over by her mother. At home, Amy was being encouraged to join in with writing events such as contributing to birthday cards. Amy's mother described how she was "drawing" letters and words with her daughter by holding her hand and guiding the pencil:

I spelled out the letters, and I was holding her hand, but letting her hold the [pen], and we drew together the word ostrich, so I try to do it like that, and teach, and she watches, and at the moment she's squiggling.

Amy's mother found the concept of her daughter as someone who could write challenging because of her own perception of writing as conventional text. Amy on the other hand conceptualised writing as a phenomenon that she was capable of doing by herself. The "squiggling" her mother described was clearly writing in Amy's mind.

Bryn

Bryn conceptualised writing as different from painting and also as an adult task within the pre-school setting. In the extract below, he understands that a pen is an appropriate tool to write with, distinguishing it from his paintbrush, which has served a different purpose:

Bryn decide to do some foam painting. He carefully painted and then asked me to write his name – without any prompting he went to the writing table to find me a pen to do this with.

Bryn was participating in writing events at home where his conceptualisation of writing involved some experimentation, often alongside his older sister. His mother stated:

I'll sit down and write a letter or card or things like that, and when we write cards to people, like birthday cards, I try and get X [Bryn's older sister] to write her name, and I usually get Bryn to do something, he scribbles but I usually get him to do something in the card, so that kind of thing.

This experimentation did not extend to the context of the pre-school setting, however.

4.4 Commentary

Overall, six characteristics or features of the children's writing emerged. First, they all understood the difference between drawing and writing. This was a consistent finding whether they were writing for themselves or asking an adult to write on their behalf. This characteristic of the children's writing extended to include Sofia, who despite not observed engaging in writing in the pre-school setting, was described as someone who liked to "scribble" at home by her mother. Second, the children always used the verb "to write" when talking about or referring to their own writing, the writing of adults or siblings at home, or when talking about writing with each other, for example "Can you write my name for me?" or "I'm writing my name." This was irrespective of whether they were aged two or three, as in the example of Amy (two years and eight months) and Vivian (three years and three months) deciding between them who was going to write Amy's name on her painting. Third, some of the children demonstrated a beginning knowledge of phonics and the relationship between grapheme/phoneme correspondence and graphic representation, for example John aged two years 11 months writing his name in response to my sounding it out phonetically with a "graphic sign" (Lancaster, 2007, p.123) to represent each phoneme. Fourth, they demonstrated knowledge of the orthographic nature of words,

letter names, and the need for correct spelling in order for those words to make sense, for example Francesca, aged three years and three months, spelling her name for me to write on her painting. Fifth, they sometimes showed an awareness of genre, as in the example of Anya (two years and 10 months) and Alyssa (three years and four months) with their story writing at home. Finally, eight out of nine of the participant children understood the importance of using their name to signify ownership, for example on a painting or drawing. This was consistent across the sample whether the children wrote their name for themselves (not necessarily conventionally), or asked an adult to write it for them. Two of the two-year-old children, Amy and Anya, had developed a signature for this purpose which enabled identification of their products despite both not writing their name using conventional text. Amy did not sound her name out when she wrote it, but her signature was nevertheless a strong, visual representation of it.

What is significant about these examples is that irrespective of staff member and parent conceptualisations, they clearly show that age was not a barrier to using writing purposefully amongst the participant children. Eight out of nine were engaging with the writing process, four of them at the age of two years' old. Despite being at varying stages in terms of how much they used writing in their everyday lives, these eight children clearly showed some understanding of the purpose, form, and function of writing. Findings further showed some correlation between writing in the pre-school setting and home environments for the children, although not always. Alyssa for example would write her name independently on her creative output in the pre-school setting and saw this to be an important part of the overall process of declaring a piece finished. This was her only observed engagement with writing in the pre-school setting during the data collection period, apart from once when she dedicated the drawing to her mother and wrote "Mummy", copying each letter from the label in the writing area. She did not sit to write stories as at home in the way that her mother described. Perhaps the writing environment in the pre-school setting was not quite right for her; or perhaps she felt writing was something she did at home when her mother was there to potentially help her if she needed it. Myra on the other hand deliberately wrote in blue in both contexts, either with a pen or felt tipped pen. Her mother made a comment about her using one letter to represent one word or name which was corroborated in the context of writing in the pre-school setting, as in the example below:

Myra: I made a lovely picture for Aunty Cait[lin].

She wrote 'C' for Cait on her drawing.

Myra: I coloured it [the picture] in.

During the data collection period Myra liked to contribute to the researcher's journal. She would always draw first and then sign her name with an 'M' for Myra.

Whilst conceptualising writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children was a challenge for most of the participant adults in the study, it was a very straightforward concept and construct for the children. On two occasions spontaneous collaborative peer writing events were observed, each time involving two children, one of whom, Vivian, was the same in both:

Collaborative Writing Event 1:

Vivian wrote Amy's name for her in the bottom left-hand corner of her painting (zig-zag lines).

"Thank you Vivian," said Amy, who continued to paint. Vivian waited patiently for her to finish.

"Right, shall we go and play at the seaside now?" she asked.

"Yes!" replied Amy, putting her painting on the drying rack and hanging her apron up.

Collaborative Writing Event 2:

Anya: Me to write my name...I know how to do my name.

Vivian: I know! I know how to do that – she adds to Anya's writing in blue.

Anya: Lots of kisses!

They laugh.

Anya: Are you my friend?

Vivian: Yes!

Anya: I have an /a/.

Evidence such as this suggested clear understandings on the part of the children of writing as a distinct representational mode for creating meaningful communication. Additionally, it was a tool that they could access, manage, and use themselves; the fact that the writing produced was sometimes not conventional did not prove problematic for them. When the children chose to write, they always described both the process of writing (for example saying, "I'll write it") and subsequent writing output, as writing. In their minds, the writing the children produced was always writing. This is significant when only one of the nine children could confidently write their full name conventionally, and independently.

Overall, findings revealed that eight out of the nine participant children had an understanding of how writing could be used in their everyday lives and indeed were using writing as a means to genuinely communicate. The children used what they knew and understood about writing to create such written meaning, for example using an emergent script (as distinct from drawing) or known letters from their own name or those of other family members. Significantly, the discourse of writing that emerged for the children was not dependent upon age and conventional writing ability. The same discourse was not however necessarily known, acknowledged, or understood by the adults around them. This phenomenon was the same across both the pre-school setting and home environments.

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4.5 Discourses of Writing within the Pre-school Setting and at Home

4.5.1 The Writing Environment: Synergies and Tensions

Synergies and tensions amongst each of the three stakeholder groups in relation to the writing environment are summarised in tables 4.12, 4.13, and 4.14 below. Whilst synergies and tensions might be expected to reveal disparity, findings showed that in relation to the phenomenon of writing a synergy could also sometimes appear as a tension, and vice versa. Additionally, synergies and tensions were similar across the two adult stakeholder groups. The children's voice emerged strongly, despite adult tensions.

Table 4.12. Synergies and Tensions amongst Staff Members in relation to the Writing Environment in the Pre-school Setting

Synergies amongst Staff Members in relation to the Writing Environment in the Pre-school Setting	Tensions amongst Staff Members in relation to the Writing Environment in the Pre-school Setting
A desire to support children's writing development appropriately	Varied conceptualisations of writing from the age of two across the team impacting on communication with each other and with parents about writing, responses to children's developing writing, for example assuming that at the age of two a child will not be writing, and overall pedagogical approaches
Providing a range of writing opportunities within the pre-school setting, beginning with resources to support Skills Development, acknowledged as a crucial stage of development for the children	Writing resources were not always understood or described as such in the same way by all members of staff, revealed in different responses when asked to describe what writing opportunities there were within the pre-school setting
Supporting a child-led ethos within the pre-school setting	Tensions surrounding children's so-called 'readiness to write' versus fears of pushing children into writing too soon, impacting on pedagogical approaches

Table 4.13. Synergies and Tensions amongst the Parents in Relation to the Writing Environment at Home

Synergies amongst the Parents in Relation to the Writing Environment at Home	Tensions amongst the Parents in Relation to the Writing Environment at Home
A desire to support the process of children's writing development appropriately	Varied conceptualisations of writing from the age of two amongst parents impacting on responses to children's attempts to write at home
Providing a range of writing opportunities within the pre-school setting, beginning with resources to support Skills Development, acknowledged as a crucial stage of development for the children	Writing resources were not always understood or described as such in the same way by all members of staff, revealed in different responses when asked to describe what writing opportunities there were within the pre-school setting
Supporting a child-led ethos at home	Tensions surrounding what constituted writing and whether teaching it was age-appropriate or not

Table 4.14 Synergies and Tensions amongst the Children in Relation to the Writing Environment at the Pre-school Setting and the Writing Environment at Home

Synergies amongst the Children in Relation to the Writing Environment at the Pre-School Setting and the Writing Environment at Home	Tensions amongst Children in Relation to the Writing Environment at the Pre-School Setting and the Writing Environment at Home
Children had resources available to write in both contexts	Children did not necessarily engage in comparative writing activities across both contexts.
Supported by caring adults within a child-led ethos in both contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children were not always supported as/recognised/understood to be writing by the adults around them in either context

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of communication between setting and home in relation to writing activity
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The impact of the adults' discourse of writing in relation to that of the children was that despite that fact that eight out of nine children were using writing meaningfully in their everyday lives across both contexts, five of whom had an expectation that what they wrote could and would be read whether they were writing conventionally or not, their writing was not always supported, recognised or understood as writing by the adults around them. Additionally, there was a lack of communication in relation to children's writing progress between the pre-school setting and home which not only impacted on pedagogical approaches amongst the staff team, and parents' understanding of early writing, but also resulted in the way the children engaged with writing sometimes differing depending on whether they were writing in the pre-school setting or at home. This was in direct contrast to the fact that the children's learning and development was the main priority for both parents and practitioners.

4.5.2 Conceptualising Writing: Synergies and Tensions

Synergies and tensions in relation to conceptualising writing amongst each of the three stakeholder groups are summarised in tables 4.14, 4.15, 4.16, and 4.17 below. For both adult stakeholder groups conceptualising writing began with a fundamental perception of writing as conventional text. At the same time, a desire to support the children's writing development appropriately was also apparent. No common terminology to talk about writing together emerged for either adult group, which led to tensions, particularly in relation to pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting and to the recognition of emergent writing as early writing in the home. It also meant that staff members and parents did not talk about the children's writing together.

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Table 4.15. Synergies and Tensions amongst Staff Members in Relation to Conceptualising Writing

Synergies amongst Staff Members in Relation to Conceptualising Writing	Tensions amongst Staff Members in Relation to Conceptualising Writing
A desire to support the process of children's writing development appropriately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not necessarily knowing or understanding when and how this process begins • Not necessarily being convinced of the importance or place of writing for two-and-three- year-old children (in contrast to a focussed pedagogy on the development of motor skills for example)
Providing a range of writing opportunities within the pre-school setting, beginning with resources to support Skills development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing resources were not always optimised by members of staff (due to lack of awareness of what children were doing, for example) leading to some of the children's attempts to write being either missed, misunderstood, or even devalued • Some children were excluded from writing activities due to assumptions being made regarding their age and therefore their ability to write
Supporting a child-led ethos within the pre-school setting	Tension surrounding children's so-called 'readiness to write' versus fears of pushing children into writing too soon underpinned by a perception of the teaching of writing as schooled practice
Understanding that an overall developmental trajectory eventually leads to children's conventional writing	Lack of a common meta language to describe such a developmental trajectory for two-and-three-year-old children, particularly in relation to the emergent phase
A fundamental perception of writing as conventional text	Not always being able to perceive what writing might look like for two-and-three-year-old children

Table 4.16. Synergies and Tensions amongst Parents in Relation to Conceptualising Writing

Synergies amongst the Parents in Relation to Conceptualising Writing	Tensions amongst the Parents in Relation to Conceptualising Writing
Desire to support children's writing development appropriately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not necessarily knowing or understanding when and how this process begins • Not necessarily being convinced of the importance or place of writing for two-and-three- year- old children
Providing a range of writing opportunities at home, beginning with resources to support Skills development	Not necessarily recognising the value or potential of the writing opportunities offered leading to some of the children's attempts to write being either missed, misunderstood, or even devalued
Able to express ideas in relation to their children's progress as developing writers	Lack of a common language to describe the writing of two-and-three-year-old children, particularly the emergent phase
A fundamental perception of writing as conventional text	Not always being able to perceive what writing might look like for two-and-three-year-old children

Table 4.17 Synergies and Tensions amongst the Adults in Relation to Conceptualising Writing

Synergies	Tensions
Overall desire to support children's writing development appropriately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not necessarily knowing or understanding when and how this process begins • Not necessarily being convinced of the importance or place of writing for two-and-three- year-old children • No common language to describe children's writing from the age of two years' old • Lack of communication between pre-school setting and home

Table 4.18 Synergies and Tensions amongst the Children in Relation to Conceptualising Writing

Synergies amongst the Children in Relation to Conceptualising Writing	Tensions amongst the Children in Relation to Conceptualising Writing
Clarity regarding the purpose, form, and function of writing in relation to the writing events they chose to engage in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most adults perceived children of this age were too young to be writing meaningfully • The children's writing was sometimes 'invisible' to the adults around them
Use of secure and consistent terminology surrounding writing through conjugation of the verb "to write"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No common meta language emerged amongst staff and parents to support a clear conceptualisation of children's writing from the age of two years
Clear communication with each other when writing, or talking about writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No common meta language with which children and adults could communicate with each other about writing • The children's writing was sometimes 'invisible' to the adults around them

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children's voice was not necessarily being heard
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Conceptualising writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children proved challenging for most of the adults involved in the research project. Findings showed that a fundamental perception of writing as being formed of conventional text amongst both staff members and parents meant a lack of understanding of how the participant children were beginning to engage in their own discourse of early writing, the two youngest of whom were two years and eight months' old at the start of the data collection period. For staff members there were insecurities and challenges in relation to how best to support children's writing, and tensions surrounding appropriate language to use when talking about and describing children's writing. Only two out of nine parents described the early writing behaviour of their children as real or conventional writing. For parents, there was a lack of understanding in particular of the emergent phase despite creating what could be described as the 'right' writing environment for their children at home. These findings contrasted strongly with data that showed children were conveying information meaningfully using what they knew and understood about the purpose, form, and function of writing, thus revealing that their understanding was more sophisticated and advanced than the adults' responses allowed for. The impact of adult conceptualisations and pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting meant that children's writing was sometimes 'invisible', where children were writing regardless of whether it was recognised as such by an adult or not. Additionally, the lack of a common language amongst all adults with which to talk about or describe children's writing contributed to a lack of communication not only amongst the six staff members but also between staff members and the children's parents. A paradoxical phenomenon emerged upon discovery of the children's discourse of writing where a genuine desire on the part of adults to understand and appropriately support writing development diametrically clashed with an overall perception that children of this age were too young to write (in the conventional sense), thus further eclipsing the emergent discourse of writing in particular for the youngest of the children.

Synergies and tensions reported in section 4.5 of this chapter show that the participant children knew how writing could be used to purposely convey meaning. The evidence of the children's knowledge was in tension with the pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting, and with most parents' expectations of the writing their children might be engaging in at home. Adults' underestimation of children's writing ability was rooted in an overall adult conceptualisation of writing as necessarily formed of conventional text and a skill to be developed and taught at a later age. It was not only assumed that children of this age were not writing, but that they were actually incapable of writing. In direct contrast to this line of thinking findings showed that children were not only writing, but that they were writing despite adult deficit conceptualisations. The participant children were engaging in their own writing discourse, driven by self-belief in what they were able to achieve through using writing as a medium for recording and sharing information. They were doing so from the starting point of a clear understanding of how they were able to

communicate effectively using the written word. In other words, the children understood the power of writing, and could use it to suit their intended purposes.

4.6 Summary Comments

This chapter has presented findings relating to the early writing behaviour of a group of nine two-and-three-year-old children within the contexts of their pre-school setting and homes, incorporating their understanding of writing and their intentions as they engaged in the writing process. Findings showed how the children's conceptualisations of writing emerged strongly amidst a backdrop of fundamental adult perceptions of writing as conventional text. The children always described the writing they produced as writing, whatever stage of writing development they had reached. Whilst research has consistently shown that three-year-old children are often already engaging with writing, the findings clearly showed that all four two-year-old participant children involved in the research were actively engaging in writing events and demonstrating their understanding of how to use writing effectively in the course of their everyday lives. These behaviours were the same whether they were choosing to write for themselves or asked an adult to write for them. Age did not prove a barrier to writing. Findings also revealed that it was possible however for the children's discourse of writing to be eclipsed by adult perceptions, because adult conceptualisations of writing could assume that the children were too young to be engaging meaningfully with writing. Lack of communication between staff members and staff members and parents compounded this phenomenon, epitomised by the fact that there was no common meta language for writing that was used by staff members across the team to discuss the children's writing; neither was there a common language used by staff members and parents to discuss the children's writing. Supporting children's writing development appropriately both in the early years setting and at home was however a fundamental desire for both staff members and the children's parents. The idiosyncrasies of the discourse of writing across each of the stakeholder groups have been summarised further and presented as synergies and tensions. These will now be discussed in conjunction with the key findings presented here in the next chapter.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The Discussion chapter begins by setting out the overall key findings of the research project. It then explores the project's original contribution to the field through examining the discourse of writing that emerged in relation to the participant children, parents, and staff members. The discourse of writing that emerged included subtle differences for the children and adults involved, thus the chapter investigates discourse of writing as a phenomenon of "discontinuous practice" (Foucault, 1970 p.50) across the three participant groups; in other words, it looks for reasons or explanations why the adults' and children's discourse of writing differed from that of each other, underpinned by how writing was conceptualised by each. Adult thinking and interpretations that perpetuated writing practice are explored, along with the subsequent impact on pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting and adult responses at home. The term 'real writing' (Tolchinsky, 2003) is used to describe conventional writing which was usually seen by adults as different from the children's early writing. Significantly, the chapter explores why, when such a rich pattern of writing behaviour was occurring amongst the children, much of it remained hidden until it was identified through adult engagement with the research project that took place. Finally, the chapter considers the strengths and limitations of the research undertaken and outlines potential ways ahead for building on the outcomes of the project to further contribute to the literature base.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

Five key findings emerged. They are as follows:

1. The early years practitioners in the setting did not think that two-year-old and three-year -old children could write. They saw 'mark-making' as a developmental stage that was not writing, because it was not conventional written language.
2. Pedagogy for literacy teaching was influenced by deficit models of children's capacity for writing.
3. Most parents did not think that their children could write.
4. Most of the children aged two, and all of the children aged three, believed that they could write. Their writing demonstrated the communication of meaningful ideas.
5. All of the children used the word 'write' to describe their written marks, unless they were intended to be pictures.

Adults working with children aged two (and sometimes three) years old in early years settings did not think that two (and sometimes three) year old children could write. The adults saw 'mark-making' as a developmental stage that was not writing, because it was not conventional written language. This led to resultant tensions in the early years pre-school setting regarding what the practitioner role might be in supporting writing development from the age of two years; indeed, most staff members expressed confusion as to whether there was even a role at all. All staff members agreed that the provision of resources to support skills development was crucial, but writing resources were not always understood or described as such in the

same way by everyone, revealed for example in different responses when asked to describe what writing opportunities there were within the pre-school setting. Neither were writing resources always optimised by members of staff, due to a lack of awareness or belief in what children were doing in terms of their approaches to, or use of, writing. This led to some of the children's attempts to write being either missed, misunderstood, or even devalued, because what also became evident is that it is clear that context is important when children of this age begin to write. Context is important at this stage of writing development because of the often unconventional nature of what is produced on the page which cannot necessarily be read by others; thus in order for children's writing to be understood the context needs to be observed or taken into account to corroborate meaning. Additionally, some anxiety was expressed (amongst staff members in particular) surrounding what was described as children's 'readiness to write' and the notion of not pushing children into writing too soon. Whilst this anxiety impacted on pedagogical approaches within the pre-school setting, it also revealed how writing was conceptualised as the production of conventional text amongst most of the adults involved in the children's lives. At the same time, the participant children were engaging with writing as a means of effective communication, and sometimes doing so on a daily basis both in the contexts of their pre-school setting and at home. There was a sense of agency in the children's approach, suggesting that children of two and three were indeed capable of shaping writing according to their own personal interests and according to their knowledge and understanding of writing as a means of effective communication. Intentionality was a feature of their writing for example, where the children wrote purposefully to convey meaningful messages that they expected to be read. Where the children were not writing themselves, they would ask an adult to do so for them, usually their name, indicating an understanding of how writing can be used purposefully in everyday contexts.

The research also found that most parents did not think that their children could write. This was because parents felt that their children were too young to write. Additionally, most parents perceived writing as a skill that incorporated being able to accurately reproduce (in other words, to write) all the letters of the alphabet to create text in the conventional way. Five of the participant children observed older siblings writing at home when they did homework which had an additional impact on their parents' conceptualisations of writing. The writing their older children were engaging in was more advanced, more conventional perhaps, than that of the participant children's. They were also at the stage of schooling where handwriting was being explicitly taught at school, seen by most of the parents as integral to their child gaining competence in writing. Parents also expressed doubt in relation to most of the three-year-old participant children and their ability to produce real writing, even where certain letters were being reproduced accurately. Older siblings (who ranged in age between 5 and 8 years' old) were still often described by their parents as learning to write. Parents described specific strategies that they used at home to support their children, suggesting some positive responses to early attempts at writing. Some parents focused on the accurate reproduction of letters describing strategies such as modelling how to form certain letters and sometimes words that could then be copied, or talking about the actual shape of a letter and finding a way to describe it through a meaningful context such as using half a circle for 'C'.

Another parent wrote letters on her daughter's back for her to guess and had been teaching her letter names. Her daughter could spell her name, even though she could not write it conventionally. The teaching of letters in this way provides further evidence to suggest that parents conceptualised real writing as necessarily conventional and therefore explains their rationale for stating that their children could not write. The parents' focus on letter formation was additionally at the expense of a focus on the fact that their children might be writing meaningful messages. In direct contrast, a focus on writing meaningful messages was fundamental to the children's approach to writing.

The third key finding revealed that most of the participant children aged two, and all of the participant children aged three, believed that they could write. Their writing demonstrated the communication of meaningful ideas and was beginning to be defined by several characteristics. The children were particularly keen to claim possession of their output in the pre-school setting in the form of drawings, paintings, and models, showing their understanding of the importance of using their name to signify ownership. This was consistent across the participant children whether they were writing their name for themselves (not necessarily conventionally), or asked an adult to write it for them. The fact that many of the examples of the participant children writing observed and recorded throughout the research project related to their names is in line with a body of evidence within the literature base that argues the significant role a child's name plays in early writing development, for example Haney (2002, p.101) describes name writing as "a window into the emergent literacy skills of young children". Research has consistently shown that personal names provide a way for children to make sense of the print world as they first recognise their own name; as a form of print, they are exposed to their name often. Names therefore become a natural focus for them as they begin to explore written language and a child's own name is often the first word they attempt to write. Children in my research wrote their names prior to their awareness of letter-sound development, demonstrating an awareness of the visual nature of what individual letters looked like together to make up their name, as in the case of children who were using a signature.

Some of the participant children, including those as young as two, demonstrated a beginning knowledge of phonics and the relationship between grapheme/phoneme correspondence and graphic representation, often (but not always) relating to the child's name. The term 'graphic representation' is used very deliberately here; and the term 'beginning knowledge' is important, where visual representation on the page was not necessarily through using conventional letters, nor was one-to-one ordination used in relation to the equivalent number of letters in a child's name. Instead, the visual representation often related to the number of sounds or phonemes in their name the child could hear. If a child's name contained either a consonant or vowel digraph, the digraph would be represented by one mark on the page. Some of the participant children were using an initial letter to represent the name of a relative such as a parent, sibling, or wider member of their family such as an aunt or a grandparent. Sometimes, writing the initial letter incorporated an entire message such as dedicating a drawing or painting to that individual; a 'C' to say 'To Aunty Cath', for example. Building on this knowledge and understanding, some of the older

participant children demonstrated knowledge of the orthographic nature of words, letter names, and the need for correct spelling in order for those words to make sense. At least one of the participant children could spell their name for an adult to write it down and could read her name, knowing when it was spelt correctly despite not attempting to write it for herself.

Finally, in relation to this third key finding, the participant children sometimes demonstrated an awareness of form when they wrote, moving their writing into more complex scenarios beyond that of merely writing their name. This was observed in the pre-school setting in the production of greetings cards for several purposes, including Easter cards written to families where a dedication and expression of a child's love was included. Despite the fact that the children were not allowed to write these for themselves, several of the participant children subsequently created cards independently, such as get well soon cards, where they did write the message for themselves. One child wrote a shopping list, and some of the children were reported as writing stories at home. Homework was another specific form of writing that some of the children observed at home and tried to join in with, creating their own piece alongside older siblings. The participant children must therefore have been exposed to a range of writing forms throughout the course of their lives both at home and in the pre-school setting to pick up on the nuances and features of each in this way and then try to use them for their own intentional purpose, supporting research built on socio cultural theory.

Two-year-old and three-year-old children used the word 'write' to describe their written marks, unless they were intended to be pictures. This was juxtaposed however against a lack of common terminology or language amongst adults to describe such a developmental trajectory for two-and-three-year-old children in relation to early writing. Significantly, it was reflected in a wide range of terms to describe their attempts, such as scribble, mark making, or drawing letter shapes. The lack of common terminology and what this meant in terms of children's writing development was consistent across all participant group relationships, in particular adult relationships, either between staff members themselves, or between staff members and parents. As a result, a lack of clarity about how children learn to write was evident. Tensions therefore resulted through the use of a range of terminology used to describe writing output that the children clearly perceived as writing, but which most adults did not. Such a disparate use of terminology had further created tension in relation to effective communication not only between staff members and between staff members and parents, but also between staff members and children, and between parents and children in this area of learning. Additionally, the lack of communication between home and the pre-school setting about children's writing was found to create dissonance in terms of writing experiences and the type of writing they produced in each environment for some of the participant children. The reality of this aspect of the children's discourse of writing was unexpected amongst most of the adults involved in the research project with the exception of two of the participant parents. For these two children, writing activity engaged in and writing produced at home was very different from the writing activity they engaged in and writing produced in the pre-school setting. Both were described as writers by their mothers, and both engaged in writing on a daily basis at home by choice. They were

both supported in their endeavours; they were observed by their mothers consistently writing stories using a mix of conventional and non- conventional text, speaking as they wrote for example, writing down the narrative one word at a time. Whilst one of the two wrote comparatively sparingly in the pre-school setting, only to write her name on her drawings and other products, the other was additionally observed incorporating writing as part of her play. This aspect of her writing remained invisible to the adults in the pre-school setting however in that it was assumed that writing would not be an aspect of her learning that she would be displaying at the age of two years old. There were other disparities between writing in the pre-school setting and at home for other children. Two of the children were being taught by their mothers to spell, but this was not a supported feature of their writing practice in the pre-school setting by staff members.

The fifth key finding, that the participant children understood the difference between drawing and writing, caused genuine surprise amongst all staff members. The children understanding the difference between drawing and writing was a consistent finding across all the participant children, whether they were writing for themselves or asking an adult to write on their behalf. Interestingly, the children's drawings were accepted as drawings even when the picture produced needed an explanation of what it was meant to represent; yet writing in a similarly embryonic form was not perceived as valid in the same way. This finding therefore revealed a distinct contrast between the participant children's understanding of drawing and writing and adult views that the children were too young to have this kind of understanding. It represented a contrast with the pedagogical approaches within the pre-school setting. The staff member views were both defining and limiting their responses to and awareness of the participant children's engagement with early writing.

Adult responses were usually given within the context of the participant children functioning within the parameters of needing to develop conventional writing at a later age. If children are however engaged in a discourse of early writing from such a young age, a key line of thinking offered by researchers such as Makin (2006) is helpful in reframing how this discourse might be understood and reframed. Makin (2006, p.267) argues that viewing literacy from a social practice perspective enables the focus to shift from writing as conventional text to one that responds to how children create and use literacy in their everyday lives. The research project provides some of the first evidence to suggest that very young children were genuinely, spontaneously, and in their own minds, beginning to engage with the writing process (as opposed to mere mark making). Whilst previous studies of spontaneous writing have primarily focused on children functioning within the framing of conventional writing, taking a developmental approach is important in understanding the important steps that children take to becoming conventional writers. Clay (1975, p.15) argued, in a similar way to Makin, for the importance of looking at what a child is trying to achieve through the marks they place on the page, and what message they are trying to convey through these. She argued that a child's efforts provide "a rich commentary on their earliest learning about print, encapsulated in their accumulated attempts to write". If adults do not pick up on children's early attempts at writing, then in Clay's (1975, p.48) words, the writing merely "stands for a myriad of possible things but does not convey a particular message". In other

words, the intended message is lost. Clay's theorisation was fully supported in the findings of the PhD study, supporting the significance of context in early writing.

The research project showed that there was a writing environment within the pre-school setting. There was also a writing environment for children to access at home. Paradoxically, findings revealed disparity in terms of understanding how and when children learn to write. Findings were in fact in line with findings from studies such as those of Miller and Paige Smith (2004) and Foote, Smith and Ellis (2004) exploring the impact of similar practitioner beliefs on pre-school children's literacy experiences in England and New Zealand. These studies revealed that on the one hand the pre-school settings involved were well resourced to support writing experiences, but on the other there was confusion amongst the practitioners involved regarding the role these resources might play in supporting the children's writing. The current research project had a similar outcome in relation to the pre-school setting, but also in relation to the participant parents at home. Whilst all parents could describe a range of resources at home that could be used by their children for writing, they had not originally been provided as intended writing resources, but more for the purposes of drawing. Miller and Paige Smith (2004) and Foote, Smith and Ellis (2004) also described confusion in relation to the practitioner role in the development of writing because of an underpinning belief that children required formal, adult-led teaching in order to learn to write. Adult-led teaching in this way was in direct contrast to the child-led ethos that the settings felt appropriate to support outstanding early years practice. Again, staff members responded in a similar way in the pre-school setting in which the current research project took place, but also to some extent so did parents at home. Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004, p.726) point out however that a great deal of corroborative evidence has been generated over time to suggest that young children actively construct their understandings within their social and physical environments. Evidence from the current research project showed clearly how the participant children were using the resources within the pre-school setting environment and at home to both construct and act upon their understandings of writing; however, this was not always built upon by staff members. Nor was it always understood as such by parents whose children were engaging in writing activity home.

5.2 Writing as "Discontinuous Practice"

There was discontinuity between the children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing which further impacted on pedagogical approaches in the pre-school setting and parents' responses at home. The overall discourse of writing within the early years pre-school setting was one that positioned children as not being able to write, and positioned adults as experts who could write. On the one hand, the discourse of writing that emerged across the participant children, parents and staff members appeared complicated in that it exuded a range of synergies and tensions. As Foucault (1970, p.50) stated however, "discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices which cross each other, are juxtaposed to each other, but can just as well exclude each other and be unaware of each other". It was possible to define the discourse of writing for each participant group and in this way to understand

synergies and tensions within such a framework of discontinuous practice. Key to this was the fact that the adults' and children's discourses of writing existed independently of each other until they were exposed as a result of the research. Significantly, all but one of the participant children were incorporating writing within their everyday lives from a position of understanding and awareness of its purposes and forms, despite participant adults often remaining largely unaware of the writing taking place. What was also clear however was that the adults involved in the children's lives were driven by a fundamental desire to support the children's writing development (indeed all aspects of the children's development) appropriately. Outcomes of the research project therefore exemplify a key point in relation to Foucault's notion of discourses as discontinuous practices; how they can serve to maintain the status quo.

Social constructions are always present and influential, but what the findings of this research project show, in line with Foucault's notion of governmentality, is that in policymaking they are usually implicit, and therefore not discussed. In Foucaultian terms the political impact of the EYFS (DfE, 2014) and other government-endorsed documentation incorporating notions of children and their writing was clear, serving to maintain the status quo through purporting a conceptualisation of writing as conventional text, and thus concealing the children's actual discourse of writing (Foucault, 1970). In this way policy was significant in the construction of writing 'truths', where adults' conceptualisations of writing as necessarily formed of conventional text was reinforced. As a place of situated (assumed) practice the statutory early years curriculum additionally provided a framework for maintaining the truth that children of this age are too young to write, epitomised in the term 'mark making' to describe their early efforts, where mark making is not perceived as real writing. It would appear that policy is therefore significant in the construction of writing 'truths'. The impact of the curriculum in this respect was low expectations on the part of the adults about what the children could achieve through their writing and perceiving mark making as something 'other' or different from writing per se. I would argue that it in this way, it was also serving to maintain power relations between adults and children because the findings of this research project revealed that mark making was not useful or appropriate as a term to describe children's early engagement with writing. Whilst the original intent of the term was to distinguish between drawing and other marks that children might make from an early age within the context of an emergent literacy approach, the research project discovered that it was in fact creating barriers to communicating effectively with children about their writing. Mark making was not perceived as real writing by adults; neither was it a term that could be used by adults with children to talk about their writing. Yet the participant children had clearly grasped the concept of an intended message despite their use of 'unconventional' forms to write. For the participant children, writing was always writing. They would always ask an adult to "write" their name for example. Peer-to-peer conversations also revealed that the children sometimes talked about writing together.

Foucault (2002, p.47) argued that there are three levels of language based upon the "single being of the written word"; the first of these is that writing (described as "a mark imprinted on the world") is a unique and absolute way to represent language

and one form of writing discourse; Foucault however argues that two other forms of discourse provide a framework for writing. The first of these is a commentary which “recasts the given signs to serve a new purpose”; in other words, how the signs are used to create meaning. The second discourse involves the actual text, “whose primacy is presupposed by commentary to exist hidden beneath the marks visible to all”. I interpret this to mean the genre of the writing. Here, however, Foucault (2002) unearths the complexities of the written word. He highlights its permanent nature, but also the intended meaning that goes hand in hand with what has been written down by the individual, the commentary, the first “other form of discourse” described above. I would argue that this describes the writing the participant children were engaged in perfectly, where commentary (context) was often needed as to the purpose of the writing. Sometimes however the purpose was clear, for example signing a painting to claim ownership of it. In this respect the second form of discourse described by Foucault involves the presentation of the actual text, its format and also the form which give clues regarding meaning. The children’s discourse of writing within the pre-school setting was ultimately extremely rich; it was one in which they were able to reveal what they knew and understood about writing, both from a cognitive and practical perspective. They demonstrated their ability for using writing purposefully and displayed intentionality in the messages they created.

5.3 Shifting Power Relations: From ‘Regimes of Truth’ to ‘Games of Truth’

Foucault believed that knowledge is always a form of power and that through observation (in other words unearthing and understanding a particular discourse) new knowledge is produced. He argued that knowledge as a form of power incorporates the notion of control and a way of regulating the population through the regulation of thought and behaviour. Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Embedded within the early years writing curriculum, through the adherence to a particular conceptualisation of children and their writing development the government has created what Foucault (1977, p.194) termed “rituals of truth”. He further argued that knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true. Foucault (1970) argues however that once a discourse is known, it presents the possibility for change incorporating what he termed shifting power relations. Following this line of argument, the notion of writing as discontinuous practice incorporated a tenet of possibility. An overarching synergy that emerged from the findings was the desire across the staff team to appropriately support children’s writing development. Running concurrently alongside this synergy were three main tensions. The first of these related to a lack of confidence amongst staff members in knowing how to respond to writing in the pre-school setting. The second was a lack of understanding of what the children’s writing might look like. Finally, most of the adults did not believe that writing could be happening at all for children of this age. Parents also expressed a similar desire to appropriately support their children’s writing development. This finding both corroborates and further strengthens the research base regarding what children know and understand about writing from a very young age in that previous research with two-year-olds has

either focused on responses within the home environment or the pre-school setting environment. This research project found corroboration with the existing literature base across both environments and further considers the potential impact on children's writing development through closer collaboration across the two environments.

Observations and interviews with staff members revealed the extent to which the early years curriculum was influencing how they worked with two-and-three-year-olds, where the central importance of supporting children's language development and their social and physical skills was emphasised. Pedagogically, the fine motor activities the children were encouraged to engage in within the pre-school setting were perceived to be key in readiness for being able to hold a writing tool correctly for learning to write, but when they were older. There were other pedagogical priorities such as language development and the development of social skills that needed to be focused on, clearly reflected in early years documentation and recent quality reviews focussing on appropriate educational support for two-year-old children. Adults, particularly staff members, therefore felt particularly challenged when asked if they thought they were involved in teaching the children to write as they did not see this as part of their current role. Parents and staff members also expressed doubt in relation to most of the three-year-old participant children and their ability to produce real or conventional writing, even where certain letters were being reproduced accurately. Writing was perceived as a skill that incorporated being able to accurately reproduce (write) all the letters of the alphabet to create text that could be read. Even older siblings (who ranged in age between 5 and 8 years' old) were still often described as learning to write. Whilst this is supportive of a developmental approach that supports the conceptualisation of learning to write as occurring over a long period of time, it is however one where learning to write begins with formal teaching, usually starting at primary school. In summary, findings revealed how adults held definite perceptions of what was appropriate pedagogical practice within the pre-school setting and how to prepare children along the developmental pathway that was to come, first in the wider Centre classrooms, and then in the early years of primary school. It can be argued therefore that in this respect staff members within the pre-school setting had created an appropriate writing pedagogy.

Whilst age-appropriate practice is arguably an important element of a developmental approach, the research findings showed that in this instance it was not sufficiently pedagogically responsive in that assumptions were made in relation to children's perceived rather than actual writing ability. Sometimes focused writing activities would be planned within the pre-school setting, but the two-year-old children were automatically excluded from participating in them, leading to individual writing practices going unobserved and being missed. Findings further showed that whilst adult conceptualisations were not necessarily key to enabling a child's successful writing across this age group in that some of the participant children were writing regardless of adult perceptions, they did however impact on practitioner knowledge of individual children's writing ability. This has additional implications for the curriculum in relation to aspects of learning and pedagogical approaches, for example appropriate planning and accurate assessment. It was this conceptualisation

of writing that both underpinned and explained the reticence expressed across the staff member group and to some extent the parents of not pushing children too early into something that they were not yet ready for. It was not however based on evidence presented by the children, but rather influenced and guided by the dominant educational discourse presented within the statutory early years curriculum. Findings showing that the children's voices attempting to classify their own work as writing were in this way silenced.

Through responding to the participant children's discourse of writing came the possibility of developing an effective, co-constructed writing pedagogy. This is in line with Malaguzzi's (1993) notion of the 'rich child', who is described by Moss (2010) as a co-constructor of knowledge who learns best by being engaged and by doing, by experimenting and researching with others and not by being told. For this to happen in the pre-school setting in which the research project took place, it meant incorporating first, a fundamental re-conceptualisation of writing amongst the adults involved in their lives. One of the two parents who reported writing every day with her two-year-old daughter at home, described her child as "writing well without knowing all the letters"; and it was this conceptualisation of writing that began to develop following dissemination of the research project findings across the adult groups of staff members and parents. From a Foucaultian viewpoint, there was a particularly significant moment in the initial dissemination of the research findings to staff members and prior to the researcher's withdrawal from the pre-school setting when the children's discourse of writing shared with them could have been responded to in one of two ways: listening to it and carrying on with the status quo as before; or listening to it, accepting it, and observing it first-hand for themselves before adapting practice to acknowledge, support and develop children's writing. Whilst staff members had never disputed a developmental approach in relation to writing, they had not expected it to begin at such a young age. It has been argued in this chapter that adult responses were built on the dominant skills discourse of writing incorporated within the early years curriculum. Wells Rowe and Neitzel (2010, p.194) acknowledged in their research with two-and-three-year old children that because most existing measures of early writing assess children's control of conventional writing forms, there is a need for more ways to record a more diverse array of writing knowledge. This was an aspect of practice that the staff members were keen to explore following the dissemination of the findings with them. A shift in power relations within the dominant discourse was noted following the staff member focus meeting, when immediate changes to practice were made. One example of this is that prior to the research project only drawings had been included in the children's Learning Journeys. Now, staff members revisited children's drawings and paintings together and decided to begin to include examples of what was now understood to be the children's writing so that individual trajectories into communicating via the written word could be more accurately recorded. Another immediate change, and a significant one ahead of start of the following academic school year, was a revision to the wording of the pre-school setting's policy statement on writing. This was again developed by the team of staff members together and where, significantly, they decided to use the term writing throughout so as to remove the ambiguity surrounding the term mark making:

We plan writing activities rooted in play experiences, based on the children's interests. For example, filling out patient forms in a vet's role play area. In this way we ensure that writing materials are available in some shape or form within an activity so that writing becomes part of the children's play rather than something separate and 'other'. It is also down to choice, in line with our child-led ethos. We have a Writing Table where writing materials are always available should children wish to access these independently.

The revised policy statement also incorporated a new understanding of the potential for writing opportunities within the role play area across the team. Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) make a case for the value of providing of exploratory play environments such as this for young children, which might involve the potential for adult-led activity as well as opportunities for free discovery (p.727). In the current research project, writing was developing amongst the children alongside many other skills. The challenge for effective adult responses is therefore noticing not only what children are doing in play environments, but also what they are achieving as a result of participation in them. Knowing what to look for in terms of what children might be doing and having an expectation of the learning that might be taking place in specific, subject-related areas is also key; this includes writing development. Whilst a developmental approach to writing had been adopted by the pre-school setting and the development of fine motor skills had been talked about knowledgeably by staff members in their interviews, what children's early writing might look like or when it might begin had not been fully understood in terms of knowing what to expect. This had had the additional impact of a lack of communication amongst the staff member team and between staff members and parents, but also communication between staff members and children. Another shift in power relations occurred therefore through the possibility of a common language and common terminology with which to communicate, understood by all, and led by the children who simply used the term 'writing'.

A leaflet on children writing from the age of two years, initially disseminated at the first parent workshops, and designed to support parents with understanding the development of writing with their children and ways to support it at home, was created involving the staff member team, the wider setting Literacy Co-ordinator, and the researcher (see Appendix 6). It included five characteristics of early writing:

1. Making what appear to be random marks on paper, but when asked about these a child may describe the marks as writing (as opposed to drawing).
2. Using symbols of straight and curved lines that look like approximations of letters and describing these as writing.
3. Incorporating writing as part of their role play, for example messages, appointments, or shopping lists, where it is the form of the writing that is recognisable rather than a child necessarily using conventional letters.
4. Recognising their own name in print and trying to write it, perhaps by copying one or more of the letters; or using a signature which resembles an approximation of their name despite not using conventional letters.
5. Sometimes thinking or expecting that others can read their writing.

The leaflet also made suggestions for how parents could support children's writing at home. Emphasis was made in relation to the concept of the emergence of writing and how to observe and provide the kind of environment to enable it to emerge, in line with a developmental approach and rather than specific teaching. For most parents this did not necessarily mean providing any additional resources. The findings of the research project showed that resources with the potential to support the development of writing from jigsaws to pens and paper were accessible within all the participant children's homes, but were not necessarily perceived as such; for the parents, as well as re-conceptualising writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children it was also a case of re-conceptualising the potential of what they had available to them at home and how the activities they engaged in might be supporting early writing skills.

The leaflet highlighted the significance of children seeing writing modelled and being included in writing practices such as signing birthday cards and writing shopping lists, although many parents at the workshops stated that they ordered their shopping online these days. Again, the children in the research project were already observing writing at home and were involved with writing events. In those families with older siblings present, the dominant discourse was additionally reinforced through the specific stage of schooling the older children were at. This is another example of where parents were already supporting their children's writing development at home but not necessarily seeing it in this way. The reality was that not much would need to change overall in order to significantly change adult responses to the children's writing, despite the dominant discourse incorporated within the statutory early years curriculum. The shift in power relations that took place within the dominant discourse therefore began to be achieved through a re-conceptualisation of writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children on the part of the adults involved in their lives. The re-conceptualisation of writing and adult responses shifted within the parameters set by the children's powerful discourse of writing; in this respect, shifting power relations were, significantly, led by the two-and-three-year-old children involved in the research project. As Pahl (2012, p.226) argues, writing should offer a trajectory of meaning that children make of it, rather than being presented as a "schooled" practice or one that can be explained or dismissed through inappropriate terminology.

The pre-school setting change in writing policy, in particular the decision to use the term writing consistently across all paperwork and therefore all relationship sets (staff member: staff member; staff member: parent; parent: child) supported a discourse of awareness and a starting point for understanding that children's early attempts at communicating meaningfully could be valued and responded to through a unified approach. The original pre-school discourse of writing did not take into account writing experiences which might have been occurring at home. There are caveats to the ideal of partnership working, however. Whilst two initial workshops for parents were well attended, they were not attended by every parent at the pre-school setting. This perhaps suggests that there was some way to go in changing adult conceptualisations, but other factors could have been involved such as perceptions of what education is for at such a young age, what it might include, and language barriers for English as an Additional Language (EAL) families. Effective

partnership working and the development of writing could therefore be an area of challenge for the pre-school setting. As the fieldwork period was officially finished at this point, there is no way of measuring the true impact of the research project for the children and families involved in the pre-school setting. There is some evidence to suggest that the momentum began following the end of the fieldwork period is ongoing in that the researcher was invited to repeat the workshops during the academic year 2016-17. A version of the writing leaflet was made to be handed out to all parents during the workshops and to all parents during the first term at the beginning of the academic year. The benefit of attending the workshops was that the leaflet was explained and brought to life through the nature of the presentation both by the researcher and the Literacy Coordinator, for example using examples of children's writing to exemplify key points. It has to be said however that the development of writing is still unlikely to be at the top of parents' and indeed staff members' agenda at this point when the successful settling in of children is uppermost in everyone's thinking. The timing of the workshops and the handing out of the leaflet could therefore be thought about if they are to be repeated in subsequent years.

Factors underpinning adult conceptualisations of writing and their far-reaching consequences for pedagogical approaches and adult responses have so far been investigated in this chapter. The re-conceptualisation of writing by practitioners and parents could enable them to relocate themselves outside the dominant skills discourse of writing in order to be part of the co-construction of effective writing pedagogy with two-and-three-year-old children. The misconceptualisation of writing as requiring conventional handwriting ability emerged as a key adult conceptualisation that was central to this research project. The research project additionally shows how through the use of inappropriate terminology to describe children's early efforts, the development of writing had become overly complicated, particularly in the minds of the staff members. I would argue that mark making as a term is inappropriate to use with children themselves because it excludes them from a discourse which, as the findings of this research project have shown, they are evidently capable of leading. The participant children's conceptualisations clearly revealed what they thought about writing and therefore how they located themselves within such a discourse.

5.3 Implications of the Research

The research project showed how the statutory early years curriculum and other key government-endorsed documentation, with their emphasis on writing as conventional text, was hugely influential in creating the adult discourse of writing in the pre-school setting, and arguably at home. Preparation for later writing at an 'age-appropriate' time was supported primarily through the provision of skills development resources and activities in the pre-school setting. Whilst similar skills development experiences were provided at home, parents did not necessarily perceive these as supportive of the early stages of writing development, nor, significantly, as relevant for eventually learning to write conventionally. The research project showed however that skills development experiences were already

beginning to impact on a discourse of early writing, where attempts were being made by the children to write. Thus, in the same way that a re-conceptualisation of writing began to take place across the staff member team following the focus group meeting, there was the potential for a re-conceptualisation of the resources and environmental supports for children's writing beyond the pre-school setting and into the wider Centre. However, a re-conceptualisation of the potential for resources and environmental supports for children's writing should also extend to the writing environment at home. Revisiting the five key findings from the research project would suggest that adults working with very young children perhaps need to recognise and acknowledge that writing in its early form simply differs from that of conventional text; it is important to know what children know and understand about writing in order to be able to read their efforts to write.

The role of relationships with families as a tenet of effective early years pedagogy has also been considered within this dissertation. This is important, especially in the light of an early years curriculum that encourages home-setting collaboration (DfE, 2012, 2014). The research project highlighted the importance of working closely together with parents. This outcome is in line with Yuen's (2011) argument that there is a growing concern within the early childhood education sector to empower parents to support the education of their young children. In the context of the current research it made sense for parents to know how best to support their children's writing at home. The research project revealed that all the participant parents expressed a desire to support their children's writing development, but did not necessarily know how to do this or what might be expected of them. The findings of the research project revealed that there was no specific communication about children's writing between the pre-school setting and home. The fact that parents struggled in the same way that the staff team members did to use common terminology to adequately describe children's early writing, served to add to the dissonance created between the two environments. Findings of the research project therefore further highlight the need for practitioners and parents to make connections between in-setting and home-setting writing knowledge and skills; it is crucial for practitioners to know individual children's writing ability and to be able to talk about it in a language that can be used by all, including the children, thus creating synergy for all concerned.

The research project presents sufficient evidence to suggest that it should be important both to listen to children as young as two years old and to support all their efforts to write; if indeed they perceive themselves to be writing. Bromley (2006) has argued that all children, however young, must be given the chance to be seen as writers from the very beginning (p.15). Conversely however, adults must see all children as writers from the very beginning. Thus, if children's writing is to be noticed, with this must come an understanding on the part of the adults involved in their lives as to how early writing might present on the page. This dissertation has argued that parental involvement has the potential to enhance how children approach achievement in relation to feelings of competence about a certain developing skill. Makin (2006) for example has argued that in order to support positive dispositions about literacy, children need to be encouraged to take an active role in such experiences. A good example of this was the father who was challenged to

reconceptualise his son's decision to do his 'homework' alongside that of his two older siblings and the significance of what his son was doing through choosing to participate in this writing event. Children may write more freely if they are able to choose where they write, as was the case in the pre-school setting in which the research project took place. They may also be more likely to initiate the need to write for themselves if there are a variety of contexts in which they can use writing for their own purposes. Certainly in the pre-school setting in which the research project was conducted, it was important to provide a variety of freely available writing equipment for the children to access independently. How children choose to access these needs to be observed closely. They need to be encouraged to write and to see it as enjoyable and purposeful because children who are more interested in writing will make use of the opportunities and experiences that are offered to them.

It has additionally been discussed in this dissertation that parental involvement has the potential to enhance how children approach achievement, beginning with Pomerantz, Grolnick and Price (2005)'s conceptualisation of writing as a competence. Bradford and Wyse's (2013) study showed a correlation between parents' perceptions of their children as writers could impact the child's perception of themselves as writers, and how parents' perceptions could also influence the status of writing in the home environment. The notion of mastery in the 21st century learner is relevant here where parents' involvement with their child, including the resources they provide and the value they place upon them has a powerful impact on a child's conceptualisations and can potentially influence their attitude towards learning. This extends to the nature of conversations and verbal and non-verbal responses to what children engage in at home and their impact in relation to how writing is valued at home (Makin, 2006). A re-conceptualisation of the value of talking about writing at home is perhaps also needed, the significance of which the participant parents became more aware of as the fieldwork period progressed. The parent interviews all ended with parents asking advice about how their child was progressing in the pre-school setting. These conversations were not recorded as the official interview had ended, but parents were keen to seek reassurance about how well they were supporting their child's development at home and how well their child was developing in the pre-school setting.

Another tenet of effective early years pedagogy focuses on the importance of using appropriate language to support development and learning amongst young children which extends to how adults interact and respond to their chosen activities. The research project showed, for example that there were language barriers to understanding and responding appropriately to children's writing in the pre-school setting and at home which got in the way of adult: child interactions where writing was involved. Adults scaffolded and modelled concepts about writing. This was happening for the participant children, but adults were not always aware of the significance of these experiences for them. There are implications for effective writing pedagogy in terms of not only understanding how the home or early setting environments might support writing development, but also in relation to what the adult role might be, particularly how they might scaffold learning through verbal responses to young children's writing (MacWhinney, 2000). The notion of scaffolding has been built upon in the EPPE findings (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva,

2004) which show the value of sustained shared thinking (SST) for example, where the importance of using open-ended questioning with children to elicit their knowledge and understanding is perceived as key to moving learning forwards. Staff members were made aware of how they were sometimes observed talking with children about writing but were however unaware of the use of verbal interactions as a feature of their pedagogical practice until it was pointed out to them at their staff member interviews. Feedback such as this can highlight the importance of modelling writing and scaffolding children's writing attempts and enable practice to become more prominent in staff members' minds. A re-conceptualisation of writing in the pre-school setting had the potential to support greater interaction in this way.

Strong, confident communication is additionally important as studies of preschool writers have consistently reported that verbal interaction with others is a component of the early writing process, for example Haas Dyson (1983), Neuman and Roskos (1997), and more recently Kissel, Hansen, Tower and Lawrence (2011) whose study highlights the ways in which verbal interactions impact on the evolution of writing. Collectively these studies provide a collection of evidence that acknowledges the purposeful way children are engaging with writing to convey meaning long before it becomes conventional; however, their combined findings go some way to supporting the Early Years Foundation Stage's (DfE, 2014) narrative relating to language development and the development of appropriate vocabulary with which to talk about everyday experiences. The current research project extends that narrative to include children as young as two years old for whom writing was an everyday experience and who were also talking about writing. There was a definite tension across the pre-school setting for staff members who used the term 'writing' with the children, for example in response to a child asking a staff member to write their name, but then not noting this as relevant to developing their knowledge and understanding. This was perhaps because the adults did not realise the significance of what the children were doing or what they understood in relation to writing because of their [the children's] young age. Using the language of writing had the potential to formally acknowledge their position and support their identity as writers; it should also have revealed to the adults involved in their lives what they already knew about the purpose and function of writing itself.

The research project highlights a need for specialist training in the development of writing. Findings revealed that the adults involved in the children's lives, in particular staff members, had some knowledge of stages of writing development in young children; additionally, they were also unsure of how to respond to children who were beginning to use conventional letters, for example to write their name. It revealed that no staff member had received any specialist literacy training as part of any early years qualification that they held, including the room leader who had gained Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) in 2014. This lack of training had an impact on how the staff member team responded to children's writing, and the pedagogic decisions that had been made within the pre-school setting. In Georgeson, Campbell-Barr, and Mathers' (2014) study of pedagogical approaches with two-year-old children, whilst the majority of staff surveyed felt well prepared to work with children from birth to five as a result of their training, they felt that they could have benefitted from more specialist input; although this often centred around, for

example, identifying and supporting children with additional needs, and engaging and supporting families. Yet if, as the current research project shows, children as young as two are engaging in the writing process, then this highlights a possible gap in perceived training need in subject-related curriculum areas.

I would argue that the optimum writing environment is not merely one that creates writing opportunities for children to engage in; it is one that also importantly responds to such engagement to develop and deepen knowledge and understanding. In this respect the optimum writing environment would be one that incorporates the above tenets of effective pedagogy to maximise learning opportunities for children. It should additionally be stated at this point that whilst findings did enable the potential for setting up constructs for change with early indications showing a willingness and desire across the staff member team to engage with new understandings and to effect change, the research project did not extend to investigating the impact of its own findings in the pre-school setting, and therefore specific changes to pedagogy therein were unable to be measured. As a result, discussion at this point becomes somewhat tentative and reflective in relation to considerations for effective writing pedagogy. It is however based on the following overall conclusions following this part of the discussion chapter: 1. An understanding of what writing consists of or looks like for two-and-three-year-old children is needed and it should be recognised as such; 2. Terms used to describe early attempts to write such as mark making are not necessarily helpful as they are inappropriate to use with the children themselves, excluding them from a discourse they need to lead and be observed and supported to actively participate in; 3. Terms such as mark making further polarise the children's perceptions of writing where writing is always writing. Adults need to recognise and acknowledge that its early form simply differs from that of conventional text; and 4. Discovering the discourse of writing for children of this age is a vital step towards co-constructing appropriate writing pedagogy.

At the time of my withdrawal from the field, outcomes from the undertaking of this qualitative case study were showing how writing amongst two-and-three-year-old children was beginning to be re-conceptualised by the adults involved in their lives, and how the children's discourse of writing had become recognised and better understood, particularly within the pre-school setting, evidence of how their image of the child had changed (Moss, 2010). Children were now perceived as 'rich', rather than beginning their education from the position of a deficit perspective. Such a re-conceptualisation had led to a more responsive and enabling approach on the part of the adults, beginning with the staff member team's almost immediate re-wording of the writing policy. In other words, the research project shows how the development of an effective writing pedagogy within the pre-school setting and approaches to writing at home had begun to be co-constructed between children and adults with a view to creating the optimum writing environments in both contexts. Such co-construction was based on understanding rather than assumptions about what two-and-three-year-old children were able to achieve through writing, providing solid evidence for the two main premises on which the research was originally built. The first premise was that children as young as two years old have the ability to produce, read and use writing to purposefully convey meaning. The second was that whatever their age, the written marks children make should always be considered as

representationally significant and interpreted as such in the context of children's early attempts at writing as part of a developmental or evolutionary process (Luria, 1929). Taking these two premises alone into account, it could therefore be argued that the outcomes demonstrate the success of the research project.

5.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

There are both strengths and limitations of qualitative case study research that need to be addressed. First, the implications of the small-scale nature of the project should be considered in conjunction with a general criticism centring on philosophical assumptions underlying qualitative studies where it is argued that human behaviour is significantly influenced by, or is intrinsic to, the setting in which it occurs. One perspective would therefore be that the findings can only be taken to relate to this particular research project because they are exclusive to the pre-school setting in which the fieldwork took place. I would argue that this is a reasonable perspective to hold and a valid conclusion to reach. Undertaking research in one pre-school setting alone with the number of participants that this particular project involved does not allow for conclusions to be drawn that are applicable to all two-and-three-year-old children and to all pre-school settings. The study was conducted in just one of hundreds of pre-school settings in the country, each of which is unique to some degree. Findings gleaned from one pre-school setting alone could therefore be seen potentially as leaving the research project open to criticisms of limited generalisability, where generalisability is taken to mean the extent to which findings may be reliably considered to be applicable to other contexts or situations. The findings do however support evidence that has begun to emerge from the existing literature base to support the fact that very young children, children aged two years and under, are already engaging in a discourse of early writing; much of this evidence emerges from a synthesis of similar, small-scale studies or from individual case studies of just one child. Additionally, the case study was carefully bounded. This relates to the boundaries of this explanatory case study where the bounded nature of case study indicates its breadth and depth. In terms of the conceptual framework of the research project, the conclusions drawn from the presenting data are therefore valid and justified.

A clear strength however is that the undertaking of this explanatory case study both informed and changed practice in the pre-school setting in which it was undertaken; indeed, Baxter and Jack (2008) argue that one of the strengths of case study as a form of qualitative research is that it can usefully inform professional practice in this way. In this respect, despite its small-scale nature, the usefulness of the findings of the research project for the pre-school setting itself were significant, leading to changes in writing policy, pedagogy, and practice. This reflects a further strength of a single explanatory case study, that it can allow for the time, space and flexibility for deep exploration and understanding of complex issues. Following this line of thinking it can therefore be considered a robust research approach, particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required to explain the phenomenon under investigation (Zainal, 2007, p.1). Baxter and Jack (2008, p.544) refer to such in-depth investigation as an approach that enables the deconstruction and reconstruction

of the phenomenon. This perspective is additionally in line with Foucault's (1970) argument relating to the fundamental importance of fully understanding the phenomenon at hand (framed as discourse) in order to afford the possibility of making effective change.

It is generally argued that case studies do not give the kind of comparative information needed to rule out alternative explanations. However, the purpose of this research project was to explore data within a real-life environment to help to explain the complexities of that real-life situation in terms of discourse of writing, something that would not have been possible say through experimental or survey research. Observation was a key method of data collection for example, one of the lenses through which facets of discourse of writing were revealed and understood. Instead of making grand claims based on a somewhat limited set of findings therefore, the outcomes [of the research project] in themselves could perhaps be used to provide a blueprint for further investigation. Biddle and Anderson (1986) argued that the formation of hypotheses to be tested by further inquiry in this way supports the generalisability of a study, thus on a broader level the intrinsic findings of the study may also be seen as supporting the development of theories which may help in understanding similar situations. In other words, the limitations of this research project may reveal indicators which could usefully inform practice and further research. A larger research project could potentially confirm whether the evidence discovered in this small-scale study is still the case in relation to larger numbers of children in order to be able to answer such criticisms. A key finding revolved around the discovery of children's and adults' conceptualisations of writing, where children from the age of two years perceived themselves as writing despite adult conceptualisations of the same. Is this finding typical for other two-year-old children who attend pre-school settings, for example? How do adults and children conceptualise so-called real writing? Are the findings from this research project typical of such conceptualisations?

A limitation of the research was the lack of focus on digital forms of writing. The pre-school setting did not include any technological devices, e.g. such as iPads, for the children to access. This was in contrast to access to technology at home reported by parents of three of the nine participant children, two of whom had writing applications on digital devices. There was a cautious note expressed by Sofia's mother however who spoke about how she tried to limit the time her daughter spent using the iPad. For the purposes of the research project, writing was conceptualised as the production of text on paper. Neumann (2014) has presented an argument for the challenges of children's interactions with touch screen tablets at home and the impact on the development of writing. Her study involved Australian pre-school children aged between three and five years however, older than the age range of the participant children presented in this dissertation. Neumann (2014) however locates her findings within the discourse of emergent literacy and within a socio-cultural framework where digital devices are described as cultural tools (p.110). She concluded that children's access to touch screen tablets at home was positively associated with letter sound knowledge and name writing skills. The parents involved in the study viewed tablets positively, and this is perhaps in line with the current research project where parents felt that tablets had become part of daily life,

for example for ordering the weekly food shop. It could be that being able to navigate technology is conceptualised as an important skill for later life. This was a small-scale study however and Neumann (2014) herself suggests that a wider spectrum of parent views on digital technology is needed. In the same way that an argument is made for linking home writing experiences with pre-school setting writing experiences in this dissertation, Neumann makes a similar argument in relation to digital devices. This is another area for future research and a wider-scale study if the definition of writing were to be expanded to include technology in this respect.

There are further limitations to consider in relation to the research design should the research be repeated or built on elsewhere. The semi structured adult interviews used in the original research project would need to be revised in the light of several of the findings of this study. More in depth questions about writing would need to be included, such as asking adults directly what they think writing is. If the original research project were to be repeated, the researcher would have recorded and transcribed interviews with the participant children, something that would definitely be included should a further study take place. When the research began, the researcher did not have any experience of working with children as young as two years' old. A new study should take into account that fact that two-year-olds do in fact have the capacity to talk about writing. In the original study they were neither interviewed or involved in informal conversations about how they conceptualised writing. Instead their conceptualisations were gleaned from what they were able to show about how they were engaging with a discourse of writing, particularly in the pre-school setting. Talking more with children would allow them to play a greater role in the research process and add to their voice in order to co-construct effective writing pedagogy. It is research such as this that supports the appropriateness of a developmental approach, but which also gives merit and reason to conduct studies with even younger children, who can already tell us so much about their writing through their actions. The research would have additionally benefited from collecting a greater range of writing samples across the group of participant children. This could also have extended to asking parents to bring in writing produced by their children in the home environment. The use of a greater range of writing samples would have supported greater validity across the findings and enabled a deeper comparison between writing in the pre-school setting and writing at home. Following the parent interviews, parents began to re-conceptualise the writing that their children were engaging in at home and their changing perceptions could have been further verified in this way. Should a larger study be developed in the future, this would be a major change to the overall research design. A second parent interview discussing their changed perceptions whilst looking at writing samples produced by their children would be helpful and logical to include.

5.6 Conclusions

This final section sets out overall conclusions for the research project based on its outcomes, building on unresolved tensions that emerged from the study, and further summarising the case for undertaking further, larger-scale research on the inter-

relatedness of writing development and effective writing pedagogy for two-and-three-year-old children. The section discusses how effective writing pedagogy begins with an awareness of what two-and-three-year-old children are achieving through their own emergent writing and the implications of this for early years practice and for children beginning writing in the 21st century.

The contribution to knowledge that this research has made is predominantly in its findings that show very young children's sophisticated understandings about written language in contrast to the perceptions of the adults in their lives. Learning to write requires both an understanding of the symbolic nature of written language and knowledge of the specific writing conventions for a particular language. Children's ability to print letters and use directionality (left-to-right in this case) showed that they understood the symbolic and referential significance of those letters, although they might not yet have had a complete understanding of letter-sound correspondence. In this respect the need to understand more about how writing develops in children from the age of two years, and how children understand themselves as writers, is crucial to developing a more accurate picture of children's capabilities. Evidence from the study highlighted a tension between adults' perceptions and children's understanding, where adults assumed children of this age were and could not be writing, thus impacting on the adults' pedagogic responses at home and in the pre-school setting. Given the outcome of the research and what it has shown in relation to children and writing, for example their confidence in producing text appropriate to the context or genre, and their ability to capitalise on the affordances of the writing tools available to them, findings suggest the need for a reconsideration of the pedagogies of writing currently typical of early years settings. In the current educational climate of the 21st century, whilst language and reading are given significant attention by researchers and policy makers, written language still has less emphasis. Indeed this study has broken new ground in its attention to the youngest children in formal educational settings.

The context for this study included conflicting views on the role of digital technology within text composition and writing. Children, even children as young as two years old, are writers in a digital age. Research on the teaching of writing, particularly early writing, has continued to be a somewhat neglected area. In more recent years, writing research has tended to be pen-and-paper-based, focusing on primary-aged children and the improvement of writing instruction in schools, echoing a dominant skills discourse outlined in this dissertation that on a global scale conventional writing standards remain comparatively low in England. Here there have been concerns about boys' achievements in literacy, and in writing in particular. Research has also focused on what makes effective teachers of literacy (Hall and Harding, 2003; Topping and Ferguson, 2005; Flynn, 2007; Bearne, Chamberlain, Cremin and Mottram, 2011), what motivates children to write (Flynn and Stainthorp, 2006), and the value of teachers writing alongside their pupils to develop a clear, knowledge-based writing pedagogy in the classroom that supports pupil success (Limbrick, 2006; Cremin, 2009-11). Where does this leave the pre-school writer? This research project revealed that what children achieve on a day-to-day basis should never be underestimated. I would argue that conceptualising writing and its developmental trajectory is important and should be seen as part of a continuous

process into eventual conventional text. The research base of what is known in relation to pre-school children's early attempts to communicate via the written word exists as valid, empirically-established knowledge and is therefore a logical platform on which future research has the potential to build new hypotheses and theories and to reveal new truth (Foucault, 1980). I would also argue that it is just as important for early years practitioners to know what might make them effective teachers of literacy, what motivates children to write, and the value of writing alongside them to support clear, knowledge-based writing pedagogy in the pre-school setting. Elements of effective early years pedagogy have been highlighted that echo and support such precepts such as language exchanges, two-way communication between home and pre-school setting, scaffolding, and modelling writing in everyday contexts both with and for pre-school children.

The findings of this research suggest that adults' understanding of writing should be based on a sophisticated understanding of children's knowledge and capabilities within a well-informed developmental perspective. The research unearthed a discourse of writing within which the participant children were active enquirers into the nature and purpose of writing. They were thinking, strategic writers who were developing their own theories about how the print world works. There is strong, corroborated evidence in the literature base to suggest that these are particular features of children from the age of three and four years old. The two-year-old participant children in this study were however also demonstrating their knowledge of how the print world works, demonstrating that children of even younger than three and four years old are engaging with early writing. The writing that children as young as two years old produce should be valued and interpreted in the light of the new perspective of writing that this research has uncovered. The implications of the research suggest that significant review of both writing practice and provision in pre-school education, including how best to support parents' writing interactions at home with their children, may be long overdue.

The participant children were sometimes able to write letters of the alphabet, and write or spell their names, for example. Learning to write requires both an understanding of the symbolic nature of written language and knowledge of the specific writing conventions for a particular language. Children's ability to print letters and use directionality (left-to-right in this case) showed that they understood the symbolic and referential significance of those letters, although they might not yet have had a complete understanding of letter-sound correspondence. In this respect the need to understand more about how writing develops in children from the age of two years, and how children understand themselves as writers, is crucial to developing a more accurate picture of what they know (rather than what they do not know) and from where and when their knowledge begins. Evidence from the study highlighted a tension between adults and children in this respect, where adults assumed children of this age could not be writing, thus impacting on their pedagogic responses at home and in the pre-school setting. Given the outcome of the research and what it has shown in relation to children and writing, for example their confidence in producing text appropriate to the context or genre, and their ability to capitalise on the affordances of the writing tools available to them, findings

contribute towards our understanding of young children's writing and therefore offer suggestions for future research based on this understanding.

Overall this research project has made a contribution to the limited research base relating to this age group through describing the capabilities of children from as young as two years old vis-a-vis their writing ability. In the current educational climate of the 21st century however, whilst language and reading development are still firmly within the remit of researchers and policy makers, written language production still suffers in comparison from a lack of theoretical underpinning. This is further compounded by conflicting views on the role of digital technology within text composition and writing in a young person's life. Children, even children as young as two years old, are writers in a digital age. Research on the teaching of writing, particularly early writing, has continued to be a somewhat neglected area. In more recent years, writing research has tended to be pen-and-paper-based, focusing on primary-aged children and the improvement of writing instruction in schools, echoing a dominant skills discourse outlined in this dissertation that on a global scale conventional writing standards remain comparatively low in England. Here there have been concerns about boys' achievements in literacy, and in writing in particular. Research has also focused on what makes effective teachers of literacy (Hall and Harding, 2003; Topping and Ferguson, 2005; Flynn, 2007; Bearne, Chamberlain, Cremin and Mottram, 2011), what motivates children to write (Flynn and Stainthorpe, 2006), and the value of teachers writing alongside their pupils to develop a clear, knowledge-based writing pedagogy in the classroom that supports pupil success (Limbrick, 2006; Cremin, 2009-11). Where does this leave the pre-school writer? This research project revealed that what children achieve on a day-to-day basis should never be underestimated. I would argue that conceptualising writing and its developmental trajectory is important and should be seen as part of a continuous process into eventual conventional text. The research base of what is known in relation to pre-school children's early attempts to communicate via the written word exists as valid, empirically-established knowledge and is therefore a logical platform on which future research has the potential to build new hypotheses and theories and to reveal new truth (Foucault, 1980). I would also argue that it is just as important for early years practitioners to know what might make them effective teachers of literacy, what motivates children to write, and the value of writing alongside them to support clear, knowledge-based writing pedagogy in the pre-school setting. Elements of effective early years pedagogy have been highlighted that echo and support such precepts such as language exchanges, two-way communication between home and pre-school setting, scaffolding, and modelling writing in everyday contexts both with and for pre-school children.

Whilst the outcomes of the study went some way to resolving tensions between the children and adults, and between the parents and practitioners involved in the study, this was a bounded case study, and there is therefore question of wider applicability of the findings. Findings show that adults who are able to understand and communicate about children's writing development would prove worthwhile, both with each other (in relation to pedagogical approaches), as well as with parents. In this respect writing must also be talked about with children who perceive themselves as writing in a way that reflects clear understanding on the part of adults of the

different *phases of writing* that might be seen within a developmental approach. A developmental approach and the important early stages of writing were what the pre-school setting was able to raise awareness of both indirectly through its leaflet content, and directly with parents in the workshops. The research unearthed a discourse of writing within which the participant children were active enquirers into the nature and purpose of writing. They were thinking, strategic writers who were developing their own theories about how the print world works. There is strong, corroborated evidence in the literature base to suggest that these are particular features of children from the age of three and four years old. The two-year-old participant children were however also demonstrating their knowledge of how the print world works, suggesting that children of even younger than three and four years old are beginning to engage with early writing practice. Even though the two-year-old children were not necessarily producing conventional text, their writing could consistently be explained in terms of a specific context to demonstrate purpose and intentionality. There is therefore evidence to suggest that what children as young as two years old produce should be valued and interpreted in the light of the context of the writing and the information they give. The findings from this research project ultimately fed into the beginnings of a review of both writing practice and provision in the pre-school setting, including how best to support parents' writing interactions at home with their children, and using common terms for writing.

The desire to develop an effective writing pedagogy was expressed amongst the staff members of the pre-school setting, and by the parents who were interested in helping their children appropriately at home. Discovering and interacting with children's actual discourse of writing is a vital step towards co-constructing appropriate writing pedagogy. In Foucaultian terms, the research showed the potential for shifting power relations within a dominant discourse of writing as fundamentally a technical skill. This can be achieved by responding to the actual writing that children as young as two-and-three-years old are engaging in. If developing an effective writing pedagogy with young children is centrally about the quality of writing experiences in the pre-school setting and at home, there is a concurrent need for adults who support children to have particular knowledge. One of the challenges for early years practitioners and parents is to create the writing environment to optimise children's development, for example maximising opportunities to incorporate writing into play experiences. The research project further unearthed how children might acquire a range of writing ideas, knowledge and skills in their early years. Within the children's pre-school setting and in their homes, even where adults provided little direct stimulation, guidance or input, the children themselves displayed a self-driven discourse of writing. They might choose what writing resources from the environment to use for example, and which writing avenues or activities to explore. It has been argued that learning to write conventionally is part of a developmental process or continuum that begins in a child's early years and in accordance with an emergent approach, it is fair to say that whilst the children involved in the study had had relatively little experience of writing because of their young age, they nevertheless understood something of its form and some could intentionally represent meaning on paper. This in itself is a starting point for future research, where a closer examination of what children from the age of two years bring to the writing events that they engage in on a wider scale would enable a greater

corroboration of both their ability and understanding. It would also enable the building of a stronger case for arguing what effective writing pedagogy should involve. The research project shows how a lack of awareness of individual children's writing competence could be to the detriment of accurate literacy assessment. The outcomes of the research project raise issues surrounding assessment. Questions regarding the development of writing, and the coherence of tasks used to measure writing are becoming increasingly important given the importance of the preschool years for later literacy and academic success as well as the strong push toward the early prevention of difficulties in these domains.

The research project revealed an underestimation of the children's writing ability on the part of the adults involved in their lives, rooted in an overall adult conceptualisation of writing as necessarily formed of conventional text and a skill to be developed and taught at a later age. In direct contrast to this line of thinking however, two and three-year-old children were not only writing, but writing despite adult conceptualisations of the same. The outcomes of the research project therefore clearly show how children of this age may possess unsuspected levels of both writing ability and writing competence. Significantly, all nine participant children had perceptions of writing and of their own ability to write. Seven children expected their written messages to be read by others. Possible correlations in relation to writing established through this qualitative piece of research therefore begin with a fundamental perception of knowing how writing works, and its purpose. Incorporated within a correlative approach are skills in relation to developing writing as a competence and motivation to write, which might include context and purpose and a development of physical skills such as fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. Both cognitive (thinking) skills are involved, and language skills. Language skills include the ability to use appropriate terminology with which to be able to talk about writing. Understanding how children conceptualise writing is therefore crucial to supporting early writing development, but rather than see writing activities as too ambitious or inappropriate for this age group, there is also an argument for suggesting that beginning with writing activities has the potential for providing unique opportunities for children to practice language and fine motor skills within meaningful and engaging contexts. Whilst fine motor skills might place limits on the type of text produced, if children perceive themselves as producers of text, then this must be responded to within the pre-school setting.

The research project provided evidence to suggest that children were using writing to convey meaning in their everyday lives. Participant children either had an awareness of, or developed an increasing awareness of during the course of the study, some of the purposes of writing in line with sociocultural approaches to written language development. This dissertation has highlighted the notion of literacy as social practice however, where it is important to remember that in addition to writing development, not all children follow exactly the same interests at the same time. Writers write best about what they know. A case has therefore been made suggesting that in order for children to progress, writing experiences must be embedded in their preferred experiences and interests if they are to be at all valuable; not taking account of individual interests could result in purposeless activities that do nothing to support a child's writing development, or remove the motivation for them to write at all. The

choices offered need to appeal to the children to include their interests, which means communicating with them directly and/or their parents and carers. Such communication further strengthens the advantages of how parents can be involved with and supported to understand the writing process. They need to know the importance of the input they are giving at home whether by default or intentionally. Adults need to know and understand that in the early stages children's writing will only approximate to conventional writing. This begins with a re-conceptualisation of what writing is in relation to very young children. It begins perhaps with understanding the significance of children's so-called mark making; if this is a term that is still used in settings, then perhaps the term needs to involve a reframing of what mark making is in terms of children's conceptualisations of their writing ability and how they are using this early writing skill to communicate meaningfully. The parent workshops went some way to supporting new conceptualisations in this respect.

Pre-school setting staff members involved in the current research project additionally saw teaching writing as beyond the remit of their teaching responsibility because of other foci for child development that took precedence, including the development of fine motor skills in preparation for writing at an older age; but also because of the child-led ethos of the pre-school setting and the formal nature that the notion of 'teaching writing' engendered. Hall, Simpson, Guo, and Wang (2015)'s literature review was entitled 'Examining the effects of preschool writing instruction on emergent literacy skills'. The formal sounding nature of the word 'instruction' within Hall et al's (2015) title would perhaps alienate some early years practitioners; the staff team members involved in the current research project would have been very wary. This is not unreasonable in itself; two of the nine children wore nappies at the beginning of the fieldwork period for example and one of these two was still in nappies at the end. In this respect the possibility of children writing was far from staff member minds. Greater understanding of how writing develops in young children in the context of child development however had the potential for facilitating more appropriate writing experiences for all the children in the pre-school setting. The findings of the research project led to additional pedagogic considerations. A larger study would therefore be of importance because it would have the potential to incorporate conceptualisations of writing amongst adults on a greater scale, and to challenge these. Adult conceptualisations of two-year-old children writing need to be explored to investigate whether the opinions expressed in this research project are indicative of adults involved with two-year-old-children in general. This could be done with a view to providing a more robust case for what constitutes effective writing pedagogy in pre-school settings, additionally set in the context of a quality education from the age of two years. It would also give a stronger framework for a support programme for parents, developed in conjunction with revised writing policies in pre-school settings to enhance understanding and to develop home-setting links.

This dissertation has offered evidence to suggest that children from the age of two years' old should be included when considering a more effective writing pedagogy within a pre-school setting. What the current research project achieved was to bring to the fore aspects of effective writing pedagogy that were already being used within

the participant pre-school setting and enabled links to be made between these and children's writing development, including scaffolded support through the use of verbal feedback. Shifts in how writing became to be re-conceptualised amongst the staff team members were subtle in this respect. A key strategy for supporting children showing an interest in writing their name was to suggest they find their name card. Hall et al., (2015) argue that for children displaying language-specific features, writing one's name might be an ideal starting point for teaching specific letter names and shapes. They suggest that for these children, drawing attention to the letter-sound relationships for their own names could be deemed appropriate. In this way, depending on where the child falls on the continuum of developing writing features, early years practitioners could be important facilitators and guides as children become intentionally more symbolic in their writing, moving them away from seeing mark making as a distinct phase which is relatively meaningless in terms of its representative value for children, and learning about what children are writing instead. Similarly, the parent workshops revealed that the writing opportunities afforded children at home were not necessarily understood in terms of their significance in supporting early writing development. This included access to skills development resources. In Foucaultian terms, shifting power relations were subtle in the context of the dominant discourse, but significantly so for the adults and children involved in the research project.

Researchers such as Weigel, Martin and Bennett (2006) make a case for a move away from early literacy research which currently focuses primarily on young children and reading development. Reading is a more accessible concept with parents, for example, where the idea of sitting to read a book together feels appropriate despite a child not necessarily being able to decode conventional text, and is something that parents feel able to do. In contrast, writing together does not feel as comfortable a concept. This is partly due perhaps to the skills discourse of writing that is prevalent within current early years and primary curricula in England with their focus on the accurate reproduction of conventional text, hence writing is conceptualised as a technical skill to be taught, additionally reinforced by the findings of the current research project. Within the area of early literacy research writing has therefore become something of the poor man's relation and the momentum begun in the 1980's beginning with the concept of emergent literacy and championed by researchers such as Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) has slowed down. There are however several clear avenues for future research that could usefully be built upon in the light of the findings of this research project, not least to challenge the dominant skills discourse further and the fact that the findings can be located firmly within the current emerging literature base on children as young as two years old and their early writing behaviour. Two-year-old children and their engagement in writing would therefore benefit further from a more in-depth analysis through a larger-scale study. A larger-scale study would significantly reduce potential threats to generalisability by taking into account the conceptualisations of a larger population of two-year-old-children, their parents, and their pre-school setting practitioners. This would not be without its problems due to the nature of case study and the uniqueness of each setting, however if each setting were treated as a case study in its own right, multiple case study analysis would be possible to look at similarities and differences that might emerge. The overall study would have to be

dependent upon a consistent set of data collection tools and a solid coding scheme for example to ensure reliability and validity across the pre-school settings and to ensure consistency when analysing the data (Kelle and Laurie, 1995).

The study did not investigate the possible impact of socioeconomic status and writing engagement amongst the families taking part, and this is an important consideration in the light of government initiatives such as the Funded Twos programme that has spearheaded the current focus in England on two-year-old children and nursery education. Nor did it investigate the quality and frequency of writing-related interactions and activities that children experience at home (see p. 61-2, and p.70). The Literature Review does however briefly raise awareness of both factors in terms of whether they make a difference to children's short-term and long-term literacy outcomes, for example Heath (1983), Wells (1986), and Brooker (2002) and more recent research such as that by Buckingham, Wheldall and Beaman-Wheldall (2013). A larger-scale study could potentially accommodate both areas, especially in light of the current interventionist approach to two-year-old children of the current government. If the study were conducted in several pre-school settings it would allow for cross case analysis of the impact of that factor on writing development on a much wider scale. This would build on research in line with socio cultural theories of writing development such as that of Robins and Tremain (2009) whose research shows insight into the environmental input that parents may make that helps children develop an understanding of the nature of written language.

The overall aim of the research project was to contribute to knowledge about the nature of young children's writing, and knowledge about pedagogies in home and education settings that are likely to support their writing development. It involved the discovery of discourses of writing, where discourse involved both adults' and children's conceptualisations of writing, incorporating their beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and individual and pedagogic responses likely to be associated with those intrinsic conceptualisations (Ivanic, 2004). It achieved this through adopting a twofold process of co-construction of knowledge; first, by seeking a clear understanding of what children of this age already knew about the functions and purpose of writing, and why. Second, it sought to develop joint understanding amongst parents and their children's early years setting of how two-and-three-year-olds express themselves through writing. The intention was to build on such joint understanding in relation to what was discovered, and so to seek potential alignment in the provision of optimal early writing experiences, both in the children's early years settings and at home. Whilst there were commonalities amongst the participant children in terms of what they understood about writing, the findings reflect the fact that they were clearly not all at the same stage in terms of writing development. They did all understand the difference between writing and drawing as alternative means of visual representation, each with a different purpose however. The children's engagement with writing ranged from asking an adult to write their name on a painting or model, to writing either in the pre-school setting, at home, or in both contexts, adopting different genres such as get well cards and story writing, and sometimes showing an awareness of audience. Whether they wrote their names themselves or asked an adult to write their name for them, they did so

expecting the writing to be read. These are significant foundational findings on which to build as they reveal aspect of children's beginning knowledge and understanding about writing and what it represents. Implications for effective writing pedagogy could therefore include the following: (1) providing meaningful contexts to support children's motivation to write; (2) supporting children's engagement in writing, for example through the provision of appropriate resources; (3) supporting the development of children's oral language skills for writing through talking about the writing that they are engaging in together; (4) considering pedagogical strategies such as how to highlight children's knowledge of the alphabet; (5) explaining concepts about print and discovering what children already know about print; (6) developing and building on children's phonological awareness; and (7) understanding children's early writing skills (for example, communicating and representing ideas through symbols and/or letters). The research project further highlighted the importance of early years practitioners being able to look at each child as an individual when planning and making writing resources available to them, including developing stronger communication with parents and the home setting in order to develop a greater cohesion between personal interests, children's writing experiences, and a responsive practice in both environments.

Since the research project began three years ago in 2014, a new revised version of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) was produced in March 2017, and is effective from April. Writing was conceptualised in the same way as the previous version of the EYFS (DfE, 2014), however several features of statutory early years policy and practice have been referred to throughout this dissertation that have been central to my thinking and my own conceptualisations of young children writing. This has included government innovations such as the Funded Twos programme which has brought the suggestion of the importance of quality education from the age of two years old to the fore. This current innovative approach in England leads to greater focus on compensating for disadvantage (Georgeson, Campbell-Barr and Mathers, 2014). It additionally reinforces a deficit perspective in terms of adult conceptualisations of the ability of two-year-old children, for example through using terminology and phrasing such as "free early education for disadvantaged two year olds in England" (DfE, 2011, p.5). In this respect, children's writing is not high on the government agenda, however a quality education is, with the argument that it can purposefully improve children's social and cognitive outcomes. In relation to the current research project this perhaps accounts somewhat for the keen focus that emerged across the staff member team on the importance of the development of children's fine motor skills as being appropriate pedagogy for two year olds in relation to writing. Four of the nine participant children were at the pre-school setting as part of the Funded Twos initiative, however this was not a focus for investigation for the research project in that all were observed solely from the perspective of the writing they might be engaging in in the pre-school setting. To this end socioeconomic status was not a mitigating factor in analysis of the findings, but Funded Twos initiative aside, there were no significant differences across the group as a whole in terms of their approach to writing. In fact, one of the children from this group was the strongest writer of the whole participant children sample, and another of the group displayed great confidence in writing her name herself to claim possession of her drawings, models, and paintings. Staff members were however

very aware of the Funded Twos initiative and had therefore located pedagogical approaches within the interventionist discourse that had emerged as a result of it. This meant a keen focus on the three prime areas of communication and language, physical, and personal social and emotional development within the statutory framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014, 2017). I have argued that this accounts for a focus on the physical ability required to eventually be able to hold a pencil comfortably rather than an understanding of the cognitive elements that might also be developing alongside a child's growing knowledge and understanding of how to use writing on a daily basis. The Literature Review also referred to Nutbrown's (2012) review of early education in which she argued for "a clear, rigorous system of qualifications" (ibid., p.17) to support the foundations of quality early years practice. This review had an impact on adult: child ratios reflected in the 2014 version of the EYFS (DfE, 2014), and on the level of qualifications necessary to support the delivery of a quality early years education. Within this context, this dissertation has argued for the inclusion of how children's writing ability develops and can be supported to be included as part of any early years qualification undertaken.

A recent government directive to extend the Funded Twos initiative to include Funded Three-year-olds has caused a backlash of opposition from pre-school settings. The government now requires that pre-school settings develop their capacity to offer 30 hours of free education to funded three-year-olds. Pre-school settings have argued that such a move will prove too costly to implement, thus impacting on the notion of quality provision in the early years. The introduction of the revised EYFS (DfE, 2017) responds by relaxing the 'rules' in two respects. Previously early years practitioners were required to be proficient to GCSE level in English and maths, reflected in a Level 3 early years qualification, before they could be included in the statutory staff:child ratios in nursery settings. This has now been changed in the 2017 EYFS to Level 2 (see Table 5.1 for a summary of the impact on these changes to staff:children ratios in nursery settings from 2017 onwards). There is an additional requirement that all those with Level 3 and Level 2 training must hold a Paediatric First Aid (PFA) certificate before they can be included in the statutory staff: child ratios in pre-school settings, a very different type of qualification from English or maths.

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Table 5.1 Current and Proposed Staff:Adult Ratios in Nursery Settings (Source: DfE, 2013, p.8 and DfE, 2017)

Age of Child	Pre-2017 Ratio	Proposed 2017 Ratio
Under One	1:3	1:4
One	1:3	1:4
Two	1:4	1:6
Three and over in provision where person with Qualified Teacher Status, Early Years Professional Status or another suitable Level 6 qualification is working directly with the children	1:13	1:13

Significantly, the government refers to the 30 hours as childcare (DfE, 2017), again devaluing the notion of what it means to deliver a quality early childhood education. Such a government directive could potentially lead therefore to the development of writing becoming lost within a new discourse that merely purports to support children in the early years so that parents can return to work. This is to say nothing of the strain such a directive could place on resources, for example pre-school settings admitting more children as a result of higher staff: child ratios to make financial ends meet. It seems that understanding children's writing development could become subsumed within the challenges of simply managing an early years setting on a day-to-day basis.

In contrast, the research project revealed that if children's voices are lost within an early years curriculum that does not accurately describe or reflect their writing achievements, and which is built on a specific way of conceptualising writing, their own discourse of writing may also be lost. Children as young as two years of age are already using writing in their everyday lives. The fact that the writing they produce might not be conventional from the point of view of an adult does not interfere with their interactions; the 'marks' they make on the paper are clearly meaningful to them. In addition, the 'marks' they make are not random, but planned, reflecting writing to the best of the child's ability. The research project has shown that background and the home environment play a role in children's approach to and understanding of writing and that a child's earliest discoveries about the forms and functions of writing are closely tied to their daily activities as they interact with others in writing situations. Children's exposure to a wide variety of writing experiences from birth is unique for each child and accounts for the fact that they arrive at their pre-school settings with different understandings of writing, its value, how it is used, and how they might use it for themselves. The research project provides evidence to suggest that children as young as two years old have the capacity to be active participants in their acquisition of writing skills as opposed to passive learners who can only move forwards with their writing development if they are on the receiving end of direct instruction; and in this way, puts children at the centre of their own writing development. I argue that as their co-educators, we should listen and be guided by them and their evident ability.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Isabella as a Writer

Isabella's Home Environment

Isabella lives at home with her mother, and, at the time of the interview, her 11-week old sister. Her home literacy environment is rich in opportunities for spoken language, reading, and writing opportunities. **No index entries found.** Isabella prefers painting and drawing at home; these are both activities that will support her hand-eye coordination and develop her pencil grip and wrist strength for future writing. She enjoys jigsaw puzzles and role play. She has a tea set with which she makes cups of tea. Again, Isabella is using her hand-eye coordination to develop accuracy in relation to placement through engaging in these kinds of activity.

Isabella's mother describes learning to write as a process:

R: ...you've already told me that Isabella paints and draws at home, do you have any views about children writing at home?

P: Um...no, I kind of just follow the process, kind of what stage she's at really I guess.

Rather than being prescriptive, she is happy to respond to Isabella and what she does rather than "forcing" the issue:

R: Do you think that you can help Isabella learn to write?

P: Yeah, definitely. I'm probably more actually thinking about it, because as I said before this all started, but I don't think as much about writing as well as the drawing and the play side of it as much as encouraging to learn so much, it's kind of learning as playing rather than intentionally putting pen to paper and right, can you write a letter.

To this end, Isabella has independent access to a range of writing materials at home and sometimes observes her mother writing. She even joins in:

R: Would you ever use any language such as – "Are you writing?" - or – "Mummy's writing"?

P: Yes.

R: You do.

P: Yeah, and I just saw on your list actually about shopping lists, I write shopping lists and she pretends to write a shopping list, she just does squiggles but she'll just pretend.

R: So she writes with you really when you are doing some tasks.

P: Yes, and she'll say oranges, or bananas, or chocolate biscuits, she'll pretend to write it.

R: They go on her list.

P: Yes.

Isabella's mother perceives writing as beyond pen or pencil and paper:

- R: So would you ever observe Isabella doing a writing activity at home by herself?
 P: Yeah, we've got like an iPad, a Kindle-y type thing, and she does letters on that, it makes a noise as you are doing it right and following it.

She does not however perceive Isabella to be a writer:

- R: Would you describe Isabella as somebody who can write?
 P: No.
 R: OK, and what would be your reason for saying that?
 P: She doesn't know the correct way of writing letters, she'll do probably more patterns, maybe an I or an s, the beginning of the alphabet, but probably not.

Here writing is described in the conventional sense.

Writing

During my time in the setting I sat regularly at the writing table, however Isabella did not choose to join me other than to speak to me about something she was doing. She has developed strong fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. She can clap her hands together properly and when playing with the bubble machine she used her left index finger to try to pop the bubbles. She is already showing a preference for her left hand, for example she was observed using her left hand to stir a mop in the water tray and also to fill a wheelbarrow outside with stones, one at a time. She manipulated a glue stick and scissors to make a crown, again holding each object in her left hand.

A Meta language for Writing

Observations revealed that Isabella has not yet developed for herself the language of writing; "We are drawing our names on it," she said as she held a pencil to write her name on a shaker she had made. She did a painting outside, beginning with dabs on her paper before trying to cover the whole piece using a sweeping motion with her paintbrush from one side of the paper to the other; "I'm making the sky," she said.

Isabella as a Writer

Isabella has opportunities to write in her early years setting and at home. In both environments, whilst she might be exposed to a meta language for writing, this is not yet reflected in her language repertoire, despite a strong command of language in other areas of her life. I would argue that she does not yet perceive herself to be a writer. I would however argue that Isabella is however already competent in areas of early writing behaviour. She has a preference for her left hand; she can manipulate mark making objects such as a paintbrush to create something meaningful on paper; she can form a mixing motion with a washing-up mop in water. Isabella has developed a pincer grip with which to pick up stones and accurately place them in a wheelbarrow one at a time. She can clap her hands together accurately and pop bubbles using her left index finger, thus demonstrating strong hand-eye coordination and precision with fine motor hand movements.

Appendix 2: Letter of Introduction to Parents

Address

6th December 2014

Dear

My name is Helen Bradford. I am writing to ask your consent to include you and your child in a research project that I am conducting between January 2015 and June 2015 on two and three year olds and their early writing behaviour. The project has been developed in close collaboration with the Head teacher of the Children's Centre, and has been specifically designed to ensure that throughout its duration your child should not know or feel that they are being treated any differently from any of the other children in the [pre-school setting]. I would like to observe your child in the [pre-school setting] during several sessions for example, particularly next term, but participating in all activities - both indoors and outdoors - as part of their normal daily routine.

If you decide to take part in the research, I will invite you to an interview (which will be recorded) so that we can talk about your child's early writing behaviour at home. The information gathered will go towards developing a short individual case study of your child as a beginner writer, a copy of which will be presented to you. I will also be fully available whenever I am in the [pre-school setting] to answer your questions and any concerns you may have.

Just to tell you a little bit about myself, I have had a long association with the Children's Centre, having been a teacher there in the past, and currently a governor. I am also an early years lecturer and tutor at the X.

I will be in the [pre-school setting] on Wednesday 10th December to answer any initial questions. If you are happy to participate, please sign the consent form below. I look forward to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely

Helen Bradford

Consent Form

The aim of the research project is to investigate two-and-three-year-olds' writing actions and interactions in their early years setting and at home.

Following the information given in your initial letter this form is to ask you for your signed consent to take part in the project.

You have the right to withdraw without prejudice at any time during the project.

In any publications that arise from the research, anonymity will be maintained.

Please sign below.

I give consent for myself/ourselves and my/our child.....to be involved in research into early writing behaviour to be carried out by Helen Bradford in the [pre-school setting].

Thank you.

Appendix 3: Staff and Parent Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Staff and Parents Starting Points for the WiSH Approach

The WiSH approach has been designed to support parents' and early years settings' understanding of two-year-old children's very early attempts at writing. The intention is to build on parents', children's, and the early years settings' knowledge and skills to extend, optimise, and align (where appropriate) children's writing experiences at home and in the early years setting. To this end a major purpose of the project is to discover ways in which parent-child interactions encourage the development of early writing skills in young children through a collaborative approach.

The WiSH approach recognises the vital role of parents in creating an ethos for writing in the home that will encourage children to want to write and facilitate participation in the writing process. The WiSH approach supports parents in developing strategies to scaffold emergent writing skills in their two-year old child within the home environment. It begins from the premise that children should be perceived as writers from a very young age. Children begin to develop as literate beings from birth; early years settings will therefore recognise children's expertise and prior experiences with literacy. The project aims to support parents and the setting to co-construct the optimum home-setting writing environments for two-year children's emergent skills to develop.

The WiSH approach is underpinned by nine key features that the researcher believes will support children's early writing:

1. Acknowledging that the graphic signs that two-year-old children make are both meaningful and purposeful.
2. Being aware of opportunities and time for writing throughout the course of a two-year-old's day.
3. Using language (feedback) to support children's ability to write. Oral feedback acknowledges children's efforts and encourages continued practice.
4. Being aware of the variety of print that children are surrounded by and exposed to on a daily basis and highlighting these to them in everyday situations.
5. Providing an appropriate range of resources for writing.
6. Modelling writing in everyday contexts such as shopping lists and birthday cards.
7. Having a clear understanding of what writing is; thinking beyond pen or pencil and paper. Children might create signs in a sandpit, on a chalk board, through painting, or generate text on a computer screen or an iPad, for example.
8. Understanding the concept of agency in children's writing; children will write about what they want to write.
9. Clear and lucid communication between home and the setting; sharing writing generated in both contexts, for example, and building further

experiences based on the child's interests.

The researcher's approach is one of minimal disruption to children. Throughout the course of the project, participant children will not be treated differently from any of the other children in the group, nor will they be encouraged to join writing activities unless they choose to.

Appendix 4: Notes for Focus Group Feedback

N.B. This feedback was given following a preliminary look at the findings that were emerging from the research project at this stage.

Tentative suggestions from initial findings...

1. Develop a clear definition of writing in the setting for all to have a common understanding and starting point for children's development.
2. The same for parents – use the same definition to raise awareness of early writing behaviour and its value alongside early reading behaviour, which is more generally understood (parents talk about reading with their children as if this is very natural. They use the language of reading with ease, for example, “Yes, we do read”). There are no similar responses in relation to writing.
3. Develop home-setting links in relation to supporting early writing in both places and enable continuity between the two through common, shared understanding.

Participant children all have an awareness of the purpose of writing and understand the difference between writing and drawing

- **Possession**, for example paintings, models, drawings (shows a clear understanding of the difference between writing and drawing)
- **To convey meaning**, for example a name, a message, a sentiment
- **They understand the structure and conventions of some texts**, for example a get well card
- **They use the ‘language’ of writing**, for example conjugated use of the verb ‘to write’ in appropriate contexts (“Can you write my name for me?”)
- **Some children have a mark that represents their name, or a signature**
- **They use what they know to create written meaning**, for example using known letters from their own name or those of other family members

Suggestions

1. Allow/develop further opportunities for early writing in the setting, including independent writing.
2. Raise the profile of young children writing with parents – reading **and** writing with your child input (Helen and X).
3. Include early mark making examples in children's learning journeys with an explanation of what the mark making represents and outlining next steps in terms of writing development.
4. Development of revised Literacy policy.
5. Name cards with an image that begins with the same initial letter sounds as the child's name. Use a font that more closely represents handwriting.

For the summer term

1. Continue with fine and gross motor activities such as bead threading, sewing, painting the fence, throwing and catching balls, play dough, music sessions, etc.
2. Information booklet for parents on early writing, possibly in conjunction with introduction of publication, What to expect, when?
3. Series of books with suggestion sheets to support early writing development at different stages to be available to take home (reading into writing/write with your child).
4. Large sheets of paper and felt tip pens/paint on floor.
5. Allow/encourage children to write their own name on work – note how some children not yet writing conventionally already have a mark that represents their name.
6. Offer a greater range of writing opportunities in the writing area. Stock the trays with more than just paper – books, card, cards, envelopes, stamps, etc. Review resources.
7. Use of outdoor whiteboard – (display pens so that they are accessible/inviting)
 - a. Drawing
 - b. Free flow writing experiences
 - c. Response to a visual stimulus, for example a number line, an image
 - d. Tallies and simple graphs, for example setting up an activity to find how many mini beasts/butterflies there are in the garden?
 - e. Planning and designing, for example in relation to builders' yard role play
 - f. Adding/responding to adult written text
 - g. Adult to draw a Treasure Map for the children to follow
8. Including early writing opportunities both indoors and outdoors – for example in the role play house. Offer a wide range of writing media such as blackboards and chalk, have an observation table. Include

writing/recording/drawing opportunities in the outdoor boxes, for example if the explorers' box is out, a book or clipboard to record what is found or to note birds seen, mini beasts seen, etc.

Appendix 5: Supporting Children's Writing at Home Leaflet Outline

Young Children Writing: Supporting Your Child from the Age of Two

Developing Writing

This leaflet is designed to help you spot when your child is beginning to show an interest in writing and to outline the support you can offer. It is not about how to teach handwriting, but rather ideas to support the emergent path that children take as they develop their writing skills over a long period of time.

Research has shown that from the age of two years children are able to distinguish between drawing and writing, despite not yet being able to write conventionally. They might demonstrate this understanding through asking an adult to write their name on a painting they have finished, for example. Children might also begin to experiment with marks on paper, trying to work out connections between spoken and written language. Mark making is a term commonly used to describe this early stage of children's writing, a stage where children gradually understand that writing has a purpose and begin to write with some intention. Whilst not necessarily using conventional letters, they use what they know to create a message. To the adult eye the marks they produce may appear to be nothing more than random 'scribbles' or 'squiggles'; but for the children producing them, there is definite meaning and purpose in what they are doing.

Children learn about writing from those around them. They see family members, including older siblings, writing at home. They might be invited to contribute to writing events such as birthday cards. Writing in the 21st century is not just confined to pen or pencil and paper however; some children might also see adults typing on a technological device such as an iPad and they themselves may be able to access age-appropriate apps on such a device. Children also learn about writing in their early years settings. Here they will see adults writing, for example adding the child's name to a painting or a model they have made. They will see different types of writing on the walls of their classroom and throughout the wider setting as part of displays.

Five Characteristics of Early Writing

1. Making what appear to be random marks on paper, but when asked about these a child may describe the marks as writing (as opposed to drawing).
2. Using symbols of straight and curved lines that look like approximations of letters and describing these as writing.
3. Incorporating writing as part of their role play, for example messages, appointments, or shopping lists, where it is the form of the writing that is recognisable rather than a child necessarily using conventional letters.
4. Recognising their own name in print and trying to write it, perhaps by copying one or more of the letters; or using a signature which resembles an approximation of their name despite not using conventional letters.

5. Sometimes thinking or expecting that others can read their writing.

Writing at X

We believe that it is important to develop children's confidence in themselves as writers. We recognise the importance of emergent writing and accept each child's first attempts as real and meaningful. Children's mark making is perceived and responded to as early writing. Correct pencil hold is encouraged as appropriate. Where children have the necessary motor control and motivation we introduce correct letter formation. Lower and upper case letters are taught where appropriate. Left to right orientation is encouraged. Children develop their large and fine motor skills using the space and equipment indoors and outdoors, skills which will later help to enable the fine motor control required for writing. In the garden for example, chalk board, water and brushes, and clipboards are available for the children to use.

Writing in the [Pre-school Setting]

We plan writing activities rooted in play experiences, based on the children's interests. For example, filling out patient forms in a vet's role play area. In this way we ensure that writing materials are available in some shape or form within an activity so that writing becomes part of the children's play rather than something separate and 'other'. It is also down to choice, in line with our child-led ethos. We have a Writing Table where writing materials are always available should children wish to access these independently.

Writing in the [Wider Centre]

In each classroom we offer continuous provision with an 'Office Area' which is equipped with a range of pencils, pens, felt tips, paper and various 'office' type stationery. In addition, writing equipment is available for use in others areas of the classroom, for example construction or role play. The same provision is made outside in the garden, often on a larger scale. We will also enhance provision to follow children's interests. Name cards are available to encourage children to copy their names, especially when labelling pictures and painting. Mark making using fingers, hands or tools is also encouraged in other areas, for example sand, clay, and water.

Adults often model writing and encourage children to be part of the process, for example scribing children's messages or stories, tallying, in role play, and in cooking. Comments children make about what they have written may also be scribed on pictures and included in their assessments.

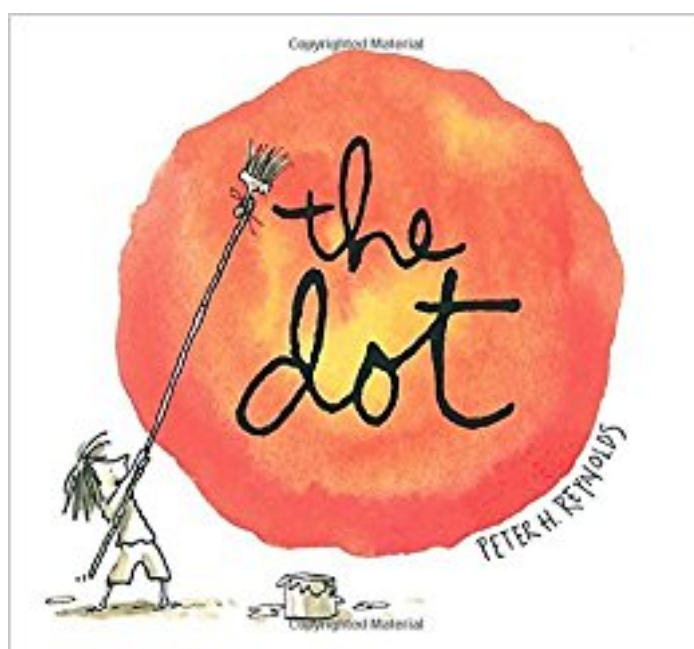
Writing at Home: what you can do

Remember that writing emerges, so here are some ideas to let it emerge!

1. Provide opportunities for your child to develop their fine motor skills such as jigsaws, Duplo bricks and other construction sets, or water painting outside.
2. Spend time outside rolling, throwing and catching balls with them. Blow bubbles and encourage your child to pop them with their fingers!
3. Draw with your child. Let them colour. Drawing and colouring will also help to develop fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

4. When you write, tell your child what you are doing. Tell them what you are writing, and why.
5. Involve your child in writing events at home. Invite your child to sign their name in birthday cards. Ask for help with shopping lists.
6. Children will sometimes tell you they are writing or what they are writing. They might also ask you what *you* are writing! Support their understanding by responding as if they are writers like you. Comment on their efforts; for example, “Tell me what you’ve written.” Or, “Show me your writing!” Or, “I can help you write that!”
7. Provide a range of materials such as paper and pens so that when children do want to draw, colour and/or write, they can.
8. Don’t push your child to write. It will all happen in good time.
9. Borrow a Reading into Writing book from the Centre and enjoy the suggested writing activity at home together.
10. Talk to your child’s key person about the writing you do at home together or if you have any questions.

Appendix 6: Example of one of the Reading into Writing Books



Information Sheet Accompanying the Book **the dot by Peter H. Reynolds**

“Just make a mark and see where it takes you”... the dot supports understanding of the difference between drawing and writing. It is the story of how a young girl called Vashti develops the confidence to draw. The book also has a focus on name writing, something Vashti can already do. Names are important to young children and often the first word they learn to write independently. The book also highlights the importance of ownership of a child’s artistic output by adding their name to what they have drawn or painted.

After sharing the book with your child, let them paint or draw like Vashti, starting with a dot on the page. Offer a range of colours to experiment with. When they have finished, encourage them to write their name on their piece of paper. This may look like a squiggle to you, but to your child, they will have written their name. Praise them. You may find that if they repeat this activity, the ‘squiggle’ will be similar next time; many children of this age use the same mark to represent their name. This is called emergent writing and is an important phase of a child’s journey into conventional writing. Bring in some of your child’s signed work to share with their key worker!

